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AN OLD LETTER.	

HENRY S. KING & Co., LONDON.

T H E
H I G H M I L L S

BY

KATHERINE SAUNDERS

AUTHOR OF "GIDEON'S ROCK," "JOAN MERRYWEATHER," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

HENRY S. KING & CO., LONDON.

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THE HIGH MILLS.

CHAPTER I.

MICHAEL'S CONFESSION.

“ By whose hand then is he dead,
And having met with what fate ? ”

EURIPIDES.

NORA had been sitting at Mrs. Ambray's feet, reading to her, until heat, weariness, and the music of a rich, soft voice had sent the old woman into a gentle sleep.

She had dreamt of George ; and her dreams, coming out of sounds so pleasant, were themselves joyful, making her have a sense of the desired presence living and moving in the house, filling its master with gladness, and herself with peace.

Nora, when she saw the old arms tremble, and the sweet old mouth move as with a sense of smiles, and with whispers of the well-loved name, knew how it was with her. She allowed herself to fall under the same spell, to imagine—not the moment of George Ambray's coming, when the hope and fear so long at war within her must, at her first look in his face, close in a last conflict, and receive, one of them, its death-blow—not this moment, too full of acute joy or pain to be imagined in any quiet mood such as the afternoon encouraged, but the peace that would come afterwards.

It was of this she dreamed; the deep, sweet lull when the excitement of the prodigal's return, with its feasting and tears and passion, its rejoicing and shame, should be past, the wonder over, beholders wearied and gone, the house left with no voucher for its joy but the dear pardoned one himself, scarcely daring to show the love and gratitude in his chastened eyes, or to

let it speak in his broken and seldom-lifted voice.

Of this and the vying of forgiven and forgivers in humility of bearing towards each other, of the few words spoken, the long, full silences, the restraint of each heart over itself in its tender dread of again disturbing by a too loving look or tone the newly-stilled waters in dear eyes, the recognition of this care in one another—making the eyes to swim in spite of it—of these things Nora dreamed, not sleeping, but looking up from her book to the portrait of George, her head on Mrs. Ambray's knee, when the footsteps startled her.

She knew Ambray's step instantly, but whose the other with him, and why they came in so much haste, she asked herself in a suspense that would not for many moments have been supportable.

Had George come home ?

What so likely as that he should go to his father at the mill, and that Ambray,

unable to express the readiness and fulness of his pardon, had hurried him here to receive theirs first.

It was scarcely two minutes from the time she heard the steps to the appearance of Michael and the miller at the door, yet in that interval the idea of George's return became as a reality to Nora—her suspense, her terror were now all as to what his face would tell her, when it should appear, of his faith or faithlessness towards her.

She had risen and was standing with her hand on Mrs. Ambray's chair—pale, cold—her eyes looking upward, praying she thought, but really doing no more than seeking to bargain with God for her desire, offering—as so many at such moments offer—joy after joy, hope after hope, out of life's unknown store, for the possession of the one thing then and there so coveted.

Then the door was pushed open, and the two men burst upon her sight and her ears like a storm, Ambray shouting—

"Repeat it here before this woman that bore him, and this girl—repeat it!"

Almost in the same instant, Nora, looking into the eyes of Michael, remembered the fears with which they had filled her on the morning he had come to her at Stone Crouch.

The panic his words had then instilled returned upon her now, and as if no time had passed since then, when the lacework frame had fallen from her hands as she stood demanding the truth of him, as if no summer had intervened to hide the rough rooks' nests in the elms with its living architecture, or to heap treasure on the wind-swept meadows sloping to the sea, Nora took up her long silenced cry—

"Oh! what is it? Tell me. You came to tell me at Stone Crouch. You have known ever since. I think you have known he is dead. Is that it? Is he dead?"

In looking at her and summoning strength to answer her, Michael for the moment forgot all else—even his master.

The pity for her which had become a part of his very nature since he had first seen her in the mill, so overcame him, that he was forced to fall forward and lean with his arms on the table as he answered her in words that seemed dragged up one by one by a superhuman effort :—

“ It—is—so. The young man is dead ! ”

Mrs. Ambray, but half awake, was sitting upright in her chair when the words reached her ears.

The face of Nora, the attitude of Michael, left her in no doubt as to the meaning of what she had heard ; and she rose to meet not her own misery, which she put aside as a thing that could, and too surely *would* wait, but her husband’s, that she knew would take him up in its power, as the wind takes a withered leaf.

It so happened that for once Ambray thought of her before himself, not through any unwonted return of affection, but simply because *her* loss, *her* sorrow, did not seem so vast and difficult a thing to realize as his own.

He met her as she came to him, and kissed her with lips cold as ice, murmuring, while keeping his arm round her—

“ Poor mother—poor soul ! Dead ! Her son dead ! ”

Then, as if the contemplation of her loss lifted his senses to some idea of his own, his arm slipped from her, his eyes looked upward, and he threw his hands up, palms outwards, like one who would push off a descending weight, saying—

“ Dead ! My son dead ! ”

“ The young man is dead ! ” repeated Michael, gathering himself up from where he had fallen with his arms on the table, and turning from Nora to Ambray.

At the sound of his voice the miller let fall his arms and looked at him.

Michael met his look with eyes in which fear, pity, and pain were almost overcome by a certain patience and resignation, which showed this moment had been looked for and dwelt upon long enough to have ren-

dered its awfulness familiar to him before it came to pass.

In spite, however, of this, his suffering was beyond anything he had ever imagined it could be, when Ambray turned from looking helplessly into the face of an indomitable and remorseless fate to the instrument that had been used by it to deal him this blow, and the fearful relief, light, and fury that filled his eyes as he remembered that here he was not so helpless, made Michael extend his hands in a mute appeal for mercy. Such a look—as that with which a general losing a battle through the treachery of one man might turn his eyes from the spectacle of loss and blood he cannot stay to the traitor in his power—Ambray turned on Michael.

Even Nora, standing, white, transfixed, stunned by the change that had come over life and all the world at Michael's words, was penetrated by fresh fear as she saw this look.

Mrs. Ambray clung to her husband's arm with a sense of the worst having yet to come.

"Mercy!" cried Michael faintly, with extended hands.

"How did my son die?" asked Ambray, shaking off his wife, and folding his arms.

"I will tell you—you shall hear all—all," answered Michael, repeating his gesture of entreaty and protestation.

"I will," said Ambray, looking at him with a fearful calmness. "I will hear all. Look you, I will have out of you every word my boy said. I will have you make me see how he died, as if it happened here before me."

At this Michael's eyes filled, and he smiled almost with triumph as he cried—

"There was never gold left by dying man, or deed of millions' value, so treasured as the least of his last words has been by me, for the sake of those he went from so untimely and unawares. Sooner would I have

forgot to see, or hear, or speak than this. I have said it all as I mean to tell it you now. I have said it on my bed at night, and in the mill, till I have it by heart."

Ambray, with the terrible forethought of a torturer, perceiving that his victim's strength would not endure to the desired end, pointed to a bench in the middle of the room, and said—

" Sit ! "

Michael, after stretching up his arm against the wall, frowning and dizzy, as if he were feeling for the regulator in some mill where the sails were flying ready to be wrenched away, and the air was dusty with the raining meal, dragged himself to the bench and sat down.

The others stood near him, and he spoke—sometimes his hands locked in each other, and his head and shoulders stooping low,—his eyes fixed on the floor; sometimes looking up from one to another of his listeners' faces.

Ambray stood close before him, his eye glittering with jealous anger whenever Michael looked, or appeared to be directing what he said towards either of the others.

Michael never paused to think—the tale was already made; the very manner in which he began it—speaking of things that they knew—showed that it had been put together long ago, and learnt, as he had said, “by heart,” with too much pain to admit of even those alterations which time and certain circumstances seemed to render necessary.

“ My father,” said Michael, stooping low, and looking as if he read what he was saying on the floor between his feet and Ambray’s, “ has a small corn-shop on the green at Thames Dutton. There are rooms over it which in summer-time we let to such as come to fish or to row on the river.”

At this Michael’s eyes looked slowly up from amidst them all, and rested on some pieces of an old fishing-rod tied carefully

together and hung against the wall. Ambray looked in the same direction, and then his eyes and Michael's met, and Michael's fell again.

“On the tenth of last August, in the evening, I had come home from the mills where I worked, and was standing in the little garden at the side of the shop, nailing an apricot to the wall, while my little sister held the nails and bits of list for me. My mother was inside calling to us to train a branch nearer to the parlour window. My father sat at the shop door reading his newspaper. He had been reading something aloud to us which had made us laugh. I was laughing very much.—[I have never laughed so since.]”

When Michael said anything which was not in the heart-learnt story, the difference was made plainly apparent by some change of voice or look. Several times it happened that some little fact which helped to colour the incident he might be telling was remem-

bered by him now and mentioned ; but when this was so, it stood like fresh paint on a dry picture, or a written comment on the margin of a printed page. These manifest additions came generally in short, complete sentences, interrupting the flow of the carefully-considered, formally-worded recital or confession, and almost in every instance throwing a sort of lurid reality upon the moment or thing which it concerned.

“ While I was laughing and looking down at my sister, and trying to not let go the nail I was stretching up to hammer in, I saw my sister turn serious all in a minute, and hang down her head as if she was ashamed of having laughed so loud. This made me look round me towards the road, and then I saw a young man—a young man standing still—looking at us. I noticed that he was ill ; [the weight of the small bag that he carried seemed too much for him, and his eyes frowned with pain as they looked at us.]

"I did not wonder then why my sister had stopped laughing, for he looked as if it was a kind of affront to him to see us so. In another instant we heard him, when we had turned away, speaking to my father about the rooms. He wished to take them for some weeks. He went in and looked at them, and said that he would take them.

"He told my father that his name was George Grant, that he was an artist; but my father being nervous about money, he refused to receive this young man unless he paid him some at once. When my father told him this, he said it would not be convenient, and went away. As he went along the road I could see that he hardly knew how to drag one foot after the other, and had often to put his hand on the railings of the green to keep himself from falling.

"He went right on to the bridge, and disappeared from our sight. Before long he came back, looking very wild and weary, and it all at once came to my mind that he had

nothing to pay the bridge toll with. He laid down at the far end of the green. [Somehow I could not take my eyes off him till they fetched me out to cricket.]

"I went out to cricket about seven o'clock, and this young man lay all the time watching us. Mostly I thought he looked as if he would be glad for the ground to open and give him a grave as he lay; but sometimes he would lift up his head and watch us mostly like an old man who has given everything up, and only remembers what he used to do; and sometimes he would look very different, half scornful like one far ahead of us, and shout out that such a one bowled too high or too low, or cry 'bravo!' or growl out heartily at a blunderer.

"I don't know how I came to make my mind up to speak to him, but we did somehow at dusk, when we were alone on the green, come to talk over what had been said by my father about the rooms, and were as

good friends as if we had known each other for months. He came home with me—he had the rooms—allowing me to settle the difference with my father. He stayed with us till——”

It was here that Michael evidently came to some expression in his story which he found was unwise or impossible to utter, and, failing to find one more fit for his purpose, sat suffering frightfully in the knowledge of how much worse his silence was than the words he had held back would have been.

As he paused, looking down upon the floor, he saw Ambray's feet silently move a little near to him.

Michael lifted his hands and eyes in a mute entreaty for patience, and again stooping low, let the blank left by the discarded words pass unfilled, and went on.

“He was the first friend I ever had in my life, and he called *me* friend—God knows why—he had everything to give—I nothing

but gratitude—the willing service of my clumsy hands—my few spare hours—my little money—such a liking as almost passed my affection for my father and mother and all belonging to me; this I gave him, and the wonder, the honest though worthless praise of all my mind. And for this he gave me his confidence, as much of his time and company as my small leisure could hold; called me friend; made my life a different thing for me from what it had ever been before.

“I dropped most others of my acquaintance, out of fear he would not care to see his friend with any so humble as they were. To make his painting-room ready for him was my first task in the morning; at night, so long as he would talk I listened, more lost in him than in the best book I ever read.

“I heard his real name. I heard of all here. His father, that he trusted to make proud of him yet; his mother, that he

thought to comfort yet; the lady that he hoped to make himself worthy of, and then give up his claim, to win it back, he said, in some humbler and worthier manner. I heard of all.

"On the third of December he read out to me how some actor, a young friend of his, was to appear in a new play at the — theatre, and seemed so grieved he could not go to see him, that he hardly touched his breakfast. I asked at the mills for a holiday, went to London, bought two tickets for the pit, and took them to him, making believe they had been given me at the mill, and we went together and saw his friend. He had a great success, and George was wild to speak to him. He was afraid to go to him behind the scenes, because he was sure to meet many people he most wished to shun, for the same reason that he had taken another name for a time. He sent me round with a message to his friend. I was not able

to give it—they said the young man was gone.

“When I came back to the top of the street, where I had left George, I found a crowd there. Before I saw him I heard his voice crying out in a great passion. I could not hear what he said. I pushed my way to where he was, for I was afraid for him—he had drank too much, we both had. I saw him struggling with an old blind man. I saw then that the crowd had nothing to do with them, but were round some oyster stalls. George was trying to get away from the old man, who held him with fingers like iron, and the old man was calling out to some one at the stall to help him; but all there were taken up by a dispute, the owner of the stall having charged some one with stealing a knife.

“At the first instant I saw him, George was using only one hand, and holding the other back as far as he could. Directly I came up the blind man shouted louder—

then George's other hand swung round towards him, and I saw a knife in it. I rushed to him calling, 'Hold, George!' But the blind man's last shout had made the crowd hear. We heard a rush of feet towards us. George made a desperate struggle to free himself. The blind man held on to his coat with his teeth as well as his hands. Before I could part them by fair means, George, mad at hearing the crowd coming, would have used his hand with the knife in it if I had not caught it. I caught it, and held it by the wrist. Then with his left hand he clutched the old man's throat. I saw his blind eyes roll and turn upward—his lips grow black; but he held George still: if he had died he would have died holding him. The crowd came running close. George shook him. My eyes were on the blind old face. I thought to see death on it in an instant. I struck at George's hands with the handle of the knife, which I had got from him, then with

the blade. Then suddenly the struggle was between ourselves alone."

Michael paused.

"The struggle was between yourselves alone," said Ambray, in a clear voice ; "you, Michael Swift, and my son, George Ambray."

Michael looked up to him, then rose, looked on the floor, and up again at the miller.

"I cannot," he said helplessly, "tell what happened in the struggle."

"But you shall," said Ambray, coming a step nearer to him, and speaking in a voice of unnatural quietness and strength.

"I cannot," repeated Michael.

"You shall!"

"I cannot. The next thing I remember, George was lying on the ground, the knife was in him. I tried to draw it out. I could not ; my fingers were helpless as the dead, and it was fast in.

"The roughs were now upon us, calling to

one another that it was young Ambray, as if they had been looking for him some time to do him harm. When I made them see how it was with him, one asked who had done it, and I looked round and said, ‘He is gone,’ and at this they took it to be one of themselves who had done it, and made off.

“I called to one of the stall-men to fetch me a cab. While it was coming, George turned on my arm as I knelt holding him, and cried out, ‘Michael! you butcher! you fiend! you have done for me! Take out the knife !’”

While saying this Michael had stood with his hands crossed at the wrists, and hanging before him as if they had chains on them, and spoke in a voice of one rather making confession before a judge, than to those who had been injured by his act.

Ambray had moved further away from him, and stood with his arms folded, his eyes fixed upon him.

Mrs. Ambray had for the time forgotten her husband, and it was George's mother only that Michael felt gazing upon him from her eyes.

Nora, who had for some time been standing at the table, just as she stood to receive Michael's answer to her question, had at the last words slipped upon her knees, and, resting her elbows on the table, held her clenched hands under her chin to keep herself from shrieking.

As Michael, having paused for want of voice, turned his eyes about him, and observed the attitude and expression of each, memory and self-possession threatened to fail him; but Ambray, seeing this danger in his wild eyes and panting chest, cried in a clear, inexorable voice—

“Go on. My son said, ‘Take out the knife.’”

“Yes,” returned Michael faintly, almost gratefully; “and I took it out, not knowing it was the worst thing I could have done, and his blood rushed on me.

"When the cab came I lifted him in, telling the man he had been stabbed by the roughs we had quarrelled with. He heard what I said; and when we were alone, and I sat huddled in the bottom of the cab to support him, he moaned out, 'You murderer, I shall not live to contradict you!'

"The cabman of his own accord stopped at a surgeon's near; but, scarcely in my right mind with fright, I told him the young man wished to be taken home at once.

"George again had heard me, and burst into tears as his face lay on my shoulder, and said, 'Now I must really die, Michael, if I am to get no help till then.' I said, 'No, no!' and kept breathing on his hands and forehead to warm them, but they got cold as stone. All the latter part of the journey I thought he was dying, or dead, he was so still; but as we passed the light at the bridge toll-gate, I saw his eyes looking at me. When we stopped at our house my

father came with a light and cried out at the sight of me lifting George from the cab. I said to him, ‘Help me, father; Grant has been stabbed by some blackguards we quarrelled with outside the theatre.’

“I carried him up to his room. The knife had gone into his side here, below the heart.

“My father sent one of my brothers for a doctor. When he came, my father and mother assisted him—for I stood just inside the door, unable to move. All this time George did not speak, but only moaned whenever they touched him. At last the doctor stood by the bed, with his hat in his hand, and said, ‘Good night, my lad; I have done all that I can for you.’ George said, ‘Good night, sir,’ and held out his hand. And I thought, ‘Now will be my ruin.’ But he did not speak of me, but asked—with a—with a smile—‘Doctor, will it be one hour, or not so long?’ And then the doctor said, ‘My lad, it may be three or

four.' 'Three or four,' George said, then asked my father, 'Where is Michael?' I went to him, and he asked the others to leave us.'

CHAPTER II.

MICHAEL'S CONFESSION CONTINUED.

"O ye, who daily cross the sill,
Step lightly, for I love it still ;
And when you crowd the old barn-eaves,
Then think what countless harvest sheaves
Have passed within that scented door
To gladden eyes that are no more."

READ.

"WHEN they had gone he said, 'Michael, come, don't be afraid. I can hold my tongue for three hours, and after that who is to know?' I fell down by the bed, and cried out, 'Don't, George, don't—if this is to be—if you *are* to die, I shall give myself up. They shall hang me.' He touched me with his hand, weak and light as a feather, and said, 'Do not trouble me now, Michael. I cannot have my father—or my mother—

or—*her*—at my death-bed ; let me have my friend, and don't let him be troubled.' For half an hour we were very still, holding hands.

"In about this time George gave a sigh, and said, 'I ought to rouse myself; there are some things I must tell you. I have been thinking I was telling you, and all the time never opening my mouth. I am feeling very strange, and I scarcely think it *will* be three hours, Michael.' Then he told me the things he wished to tell me. Some day they may be told by me again, but not now."

"You will keep back nothing my son said that night," commanded Ambray, who was now listening with his back turned upon Michael.

Michael remained silent a moment. At last he said—

"When I told you that every word of his should be repeated, I had forgotten that these things I speak of could not be told,

as I promised him that I would keep them from you. Will you wish me to break my word to him?"

As Ambray did not answer, Michael went on, as if he had his consent to leave the matters of which he had spoken untold.

"Soon after this George seemed to fall asleep. It was near three in the morning, and I think he slept for half an hour. He woke, clutching at the counterpane, and calling, 'Michael, Michael! wake, wake!' I said, 'In heaven's name, George, do you think that *I* could sleep?'

"Then he said, 'Up, up, lift me up.' I raised him, and he clung to me, whispering, 'It is no use, Michael, I must go home.'

"His cheeks were wet, his forehead was all in lines, but his mouth smiled. I said, 'Home, George?' not understanding, and he said, 'I must go there now in my mind, I mean, instead of looking from here for help. If there is a forgiving God, it is there only I can find Him—where I was

born—where I left Him—where I lost Him. Why did I come away? Ah, to get back! Michael, Michael, to get back! ”

Ambray's folded arms loosened and fell, like a band suddenly snapped, by the motion of his chest.

“ He lay—George lay—with his head on my shoulder,” Michael went on, “ and his voice close at my ear. ‘ Now, now,’ he said, ‘ I will think of it, I will remember it, while my life—is going from me; my life—does that mean my soul, Michael? Is this what they call the spirit—this strength, that is tearing itself up from every part of me like a tree with roots and fibres not loosed by age, but cruelly wrenched while it has strongest hold?’ And I said, ‘ And by my hand, George, by my hand.’ ‘ Hush! ’ he whispered; ‘ let me remember, and perhaps this life—this soul, is it?—may go to the place I am remembering, seeing——’ ”

By this time Nora had risen and come close to Michael, up at whose face she gazed almost breathlessly.

Ambray stood—still with his back to them—looking out through the open door upon those scenes towards which Michael showed George's last thoughts had struggled.

"For some little time," continued Michael, "he lay with his arms over my shoulders, trembling very much, and making sudden starts. 'George,' I said to him, 'is the pain so great?' (of his wound I meant), and he said, 'Yes, it is a pain to me to see it all so faintly. Ah, have I loved it so little to have so forgotten! Yes, hold me higher. I begin to see the shapes of the fields; the mist goes; grand, grand downs! A very world of them, Michael!' And then, trembling more still, he said, 'And ah, those farm clusters, Michael! Clumsy, sweet—sweet rustic bouquets of ricks—and oast-house—and home dotting the dear horizon and the valley's slopes and deeps—shall I *never* see them any more—never, never smell their bleaching hay or wood-

fires in the breeze? *my* breeze that turns the mill. It is very dark. God! let me find the way home—father—father, father! ” ”

“ George! ” cried Ambray, stretching out his arms and lifting his face to the scenes last pictured without brush or pencil by the dying painter. “ Oh, let him find me! Oh, let the wandering spirit come! ”

At this cry Michael paused and struggled with himself; then went on, speaking more quickly, like one feeling his endurance to be near an end.

“ When George had said—what I have said—he shook and clung so, that I knew that the end must be coming. At last he let me lay him down, and was still—he was very still. In a minute I saw his lips move. I hoped he might be praying, for he had not, I think, prayed yet. But when I had sate for some time hoping this, he moaned out as if he had but just found voice after trying for it long, ‘ Michael, do you hear me? ’ I said, ‘ God help me, no, George, I

have not heard you. What is it, dear lad?' Then he looked at me, and put his hand on mine and said, 'You will not let them want, my father and mother, so that they will cry out against me for my neglect, my cruelty?' I went on my knees at his bed, and my answer was, 'George Ambray, tonight as I have sat beside you I have sworn to God to go to the High Mills, and be your father's servant, if it be possible to make him take me, and, under cover of this service, be a son to him, so far as he may let me.' 'You will!' George said smiling, and with faint eyes running over. 'You will go to the old people, and work for them?' 'Ay, like a slave,' I said, 'and guard them like a dog, grateful to God if He will let me give my life to them for yours that I have lost for them so early.'

"The comfort of this promise, for it did comfort him much, reached him just in time. His face changed so much and so suddenly, that I turned stiff as I knelt

watching. Then I saw the wish to speak torturing him, and bent down and strained my very soul to hear. I heard at last, ‘ My father ! ’ and I nodded and said, ‘ Comfort, George, he shall hear from me some day how he was with you at this last.’

“ ‘ And the lady,’ I said, ‘ the lady whose life is this night ruined, shall I tell *her* this too ? ’ He looked at me ; I thought a great trouble came in his eyes. I waited, looking as well as listening for the answer. Fresh pain seized him ; it was his last ; in it he turned to me with a look that seemed to mean, ‘ I *would* speak of other things, but I have but time for the one nearest to my heart,’ and so looking cried out once more, ‘ My father ! ’ And his head fell, his teeth locked—it was over.”

“ His first word—and—his last,” murmured Ambray, looking upward in tenderest exultation ; suddenly he seemed to remember Nora, and the pain she might be suffering at George’s apparent neglect of her in

his last hours, for he went to her and touched her shoulder, saying—

“Forgive him—dear child—poor child—he loved you—yes, yes—he loved you—but father and son—father and child—there is no tie—oh, there can be no tie like it!—none—none.”

A touch came on Michael's hand. It was Mrs. Ambray's—cold and trembling.

“Was it without one prayer?” she asked; “without one word of prayer?”

“Prayer!” cried Ambray, turning upon them before Michael could answer. “And why should *he* have prayed? Does the babe on its mother's breast cry for its mother? Does the bird nested in the corn cry out for food? Do you suppose God was not glad enough to take back such work of his, and that George did not know it? Go on.”

“I said—I said that it was over,” pleaded Michael.

“Over,” cried Ambray, turning upon him

fiercely ; “ why, the breath had scarcely left his lips—I mean—I will know all the rest—but perhaps you hurried him warm into his grave—my slaughtered lamb ! Did you so ? —butcher ! Where is he buried ? Was there no inquest ? ”

“ There was an inquest,” answered Michael, “ the verdict, *manslaughter against a person or persons unknown.* ”

“ He was buried in the churchyard at Thames Dutton, on the eighth of December. I sat in his room all the five days and four nights. On the night before they came to nail his coffin down, I was half mad to think he was so soon to be shut from sight and none belonging to him to see him before it was so. His face was wonderful, most beautiful. That it should be closed up without any eye more dear to him than mine to look on it, or any lips to set a parting kiss on it, unmanned me more than all the rest. I asked myself is there *no* honour I can do him at this last hour ? None ? ”

"Then I thought of my little sister I had offended him about so often by keeping her out of his sight ; a little lass of fifteen she was—fair as a lily, and as weak and simple ; and I was over proud and careful of her, and often made George angry by sending her away from us when she would come to look at his pictures ; I am very sorry—but—she is my only sister.

"I went up and brought her down, amazed, out of her sleep. There was a tall white flower upon the staircase window—I don't know the name of it, but it is common ; we always have one there in the winter. Not a week before, George had seen my sister looking at it, half opened, and had said to me, 'Why, Michael, soon you will have to tell me which is which :' and I had been vexed, and sent her to her work. I remembered this as I brought her down past the flower that night, and I told her to gather it, and bring it with her.

"While she was doing so, I saw out in the

moonlight the two men coming across the green to nail the coffin. So I made her hurry and lay her flower beside him—the long stalk at his side, and the large blossom on his shoulder—and I made her kiss him for each of the three I was cheating of this last sight of him. Then the quiet knock came at the street door, and I took the child in my arms, and carried her fainting to her mother, and my father came down with me to see—to see it done, and it was done."

Ambray had gone and stood before the portrait of George that hung over the mantelpiece, and was looking up at it with folded arms and eyes full of ecstatic light and tears, to keep which from falling he held his rugged brows dragged up.

When he had been so for some time after Michael had ceased speaking, he suddenly threw up his clasped hands towards the picture, crying in a low, thick voice—

"A flower to honour *you*! What flower ever opened upon earth fit for such close fellowship with such a face? Oh, beautiful! Oh, cruelly used! George! George!"

CHAPTER III.

“SUMITE PŒNAS.”

“He is attached;
Call him to present trial: if he may
Find mercy in the law, 'tis his; if none,
Let him not seek't of us.”

SHAKSPEARE.

HELPLESSLY as a child might sit and watch the upcurled wave from which it cannot run—darkening and foaming in suspended force before its break and rush—the three watched Ambray in the silence that followed this cry, at once so scornful and so tender.

When at last the face was lifted from the hands wherein it had fallen, and turned towards them, its expression was one of simple recollection and horror.

“Why, Esther!” he exclaimed. “Nora! God help our miserable, helpless law! Do you know I verily believe this man will escape hanging.”

As in his passionate declaration of this fear he flung his hands towards where Michael sat stooping as if he had been half crushed by a weight and could not straighten himself, Nora turned quickly in shuddering remonstrance, as Michael had seen her do when the life of a worm or fly was threatened.

She said nothing; but the turning of her head, the quick breath, the shudder, told him all that he dared yet ask of God concerning her—whether he was a guilty, despicable wretch in her eyes, or only a most unfortunate man.

This thing, slight as it was, sent a thrill of warmth, of life, through his chilled and stunned senses, and he was able to lift up his head and look with gentleness at Ambray as he stood before him.

"I came to work it out, master; I could do no more," he pleaded.

"Hold your tongue," said Ambray, white and shrill with fury; "call the insult of living in my presence and grinding my corn—work—and, old as I am, I—I will take the law in my own hands."

"Oh, John, John!" cried Mrs. Ambray, coming between them; "have you not both enough to suffer without talking of *more* punishment—more misery?"

"I will," cried Ambray, "if they will not punish him, or if he tries to slip the law, I'll take it in my own hands. No punishment! Why, I'd rather appear before that boy's grandfather and uncles with a halter round my own neck than have to tell them that his murderer lives—goes free. But who talks of it? Here, Esther, you must go—go to two or three people that I will tell you of; and, Nora, go to General Millwood's—I must have advice and help. And yet—friends! friends! I dread 'em! I've a good

mind to have him up to London—myself—and hear what the law can do—myself. I will. That's what I'll do. To-morrow is Tuesday. There'll be Dynely's cart going to the Bay. But what is this man to be done with all night? Can no one advise me, or help me? What shall I do with him?”

“Ambray! Ambray!” cried Michael, rising and turning upon him with eyes big with pity, reproach, and sorrowful scorn, “do you think all your lawing, even if it brought death itself, is more to me compared with your grief than a sparrow's peck to a man upon the rack?

“I did not wish to shun the *law*; it was not the fear of that kept me from stopping at the first surgeon's with that poor lad—if all had come out at once I should have had evidence enough on my side to make my punishment a mere nothing. I am certain of it—certain.

“But if all the law could do, supposing the

utmost had been done, would it have paid you for his loss, would it have given you bread, and one to serve you in your need and loneliness, and kept you from cursing the man who had brought all this upon you? If the law could have comforted you by having me, it should have had me; for it was this was my great dread and turned me coward—this that has come upon me after all.

“Well, if the law can comfort you now, let it, let it! But to talk as if no prison were strong enough to hold one night a man for whom all the world—all life—is a prison, till you set him free by your forgiveness, is a mockery, an insult even I will not bear. Ha! master, how am I speaking? I beg your pardon—I do—forgive me! but, indeed, you do not know. You do not know me, or you would feel that to imprison me, to bind me to you any faster than I am bound already, is like tying a hair round hands fettered with iron. Let me go. I will be in the mill when you want me.”

The miller made no movement to detain him, but when he had reached the gate at the end of the little garden, Michael knew the tall figure was in the doorway looking after him and watching him up the mill-field.

CHAPTER IV.

AT SUNSET.

“The purple from the distance dies,
My prospect and horizon gone.”

TENNYSON.

TILL he had seen Nora crossing the Buckholt fields, Michael never moved from the window from which he had watched Ambray all the long August morning.

By this time the sun was setting; all the colours of the downs were turning soft and sad under the shadows. As Nora went home, with her back to the west, her shadow lay before her half across the field; and Michael watched its weary sway, and the weary form following it, till the little pane of glass through which he looked

seemed to thicken and darken, and he could see it no more.

He got up and went to the window that looked down on the strip of road where he could see the Team.

A large trim brewer's dray was standing before it.

Michael no sooner caught sight of it than he took his cap, but forgetting to put it on, ran out of the mill, and across the field to Ambray's cottage.

He opened the door. Ambray was sitting right before it.

"Gillied's dray is here—at the Team," he said. "I cannot rest any more than you; why should we wait till morning?"

Ambray half rose, but his wife coming between them, placed her hands tremblingly on his shoulder, and pushed him back in his chair.

"No, no," she whispered with her lips on his burning forehead. "In the morning Nora will bring us money. You have no

money now. What can you do without? Wait till the morning."

Then turning quickly towards Michael, she drew him out, whispering angrily—

"Why did you come? I had but just quieted him. He has been like a madman. Go," she said, sinking her voice still lower, drawing him further out, and pressing his arm with her shaking hands—"go in the dray yourself. Get from him, and save us from further misery! Go!"

Michael went from the cottage straight to the Team, but only to stand staring at the dray till it drove off, when he again returned to the mill.

CHAPTER V.

MICHAEL'S VISITORS.

"Who is it that calls, partially opening the doors? with what terror he calls?"

EURIPIDES.

MICHAEL groped about in the dusk over such little tasks of labour and forethought as the absence of himself and Ambray, and the coming of a stranger, seemed to render necessary.

It was not so much a sense of duty which made him do this, as it was an instinct that impelled him to guard himself from surrendering thus early in the night to the frightful sense of injustice, misery, and despair that was gaining fresh strength in him every moment.

The night came on hot and dark.

He was passing one of the windows on the shooting-floor when he saw a light in the mill-field.

The instant that Michael looked, the light showed him a figure a few yards away from it, which he recognized as Ma'r S'one's.

Seeing this, he fixed his whole attention on the light, and saw the gleam of a white hand, then of a face, then he felt rather than heard a step, while a name trembled on his lips.

It was Nora carrying a lantern under her shawl.

She came to the mill-door, and stood listening.

When Michael saw her, he shrank back into a corner of the dusky little room.

He stood like a stone figure carved there when the wall was made; his head and shoulders bent so as to fit under the sloping ceiling; his brows drawn up; his nostrils wide; his lips kept apart by thick-coming

breaths ; his eyes turned to the opening in the floor with inexpressible dread.

His torture was to begin afresh, he felt. Nora, unable to believe in or endure the idea he had given of George's faint regard for her, had come to demand more of him : to implore him by all he had lost to her to tell her if there had really been no message, no last word forgotten in Ambray's terrifying presence, and which he could now remember and repeat to her.

The thought of this stricken widowed heart coming to plead to him against the double widowhood his history of George's last days suggested, in hinting at the death of George's love before his own death, filled Michael with such alarm and pain, he had not the power to move when Nora knocked, or to answer when she opened the mill-door and called his name,—

“ Michael Swift.”

He pressed back more tightly, straining his lowered head and shoulders against

ceiling and wall, as if he meant to lift and throw them off like some movable burden.

"Ma'rs Michael," cried Ma'r S'one in a shaking, agitated voice, "Ma'rs Michael!"

Michael heard them come up as far as the grinding-floor, and stand still there.

"He is not here, Ma'r S'one," sad Nora under her breath. "He has gone."

"'Cline our 'erts! he's aarf!" answered Ma'r S'one lower down the mill.

The dots of light from the lantern holes moved from where they had been resting tremblingly on the wall, by which was the square opening leading to the steps.

No sooner did Michael grow conscious that his visitors were giving up their search for him and going away, than the idea of being left alone to the long night, the bitter morning, the strange journey, the terrible companion, became suddenly so insupportable, he could not keep his agony from bursting from him.

"Ma'r S'one!" he cried in a kind of frenzy, "Ma'r S'one!"

After a short pause, a voice from below answered tremblingly, and as if remonstrating against some influence that would hold it silent—

"'Cline our 'erts to keep this la'! Hollo!
Ma'rs Michael! where be?"

By this time Michael was repentant of his cowardice, his cry.

The dots of light came back upon the wall; they danced higher, passed to the ceiling, the dusk lightened.

First appeared the intricate embroidery of the back of Ma'r S'one's smock collar—then his head, its silver hair flat with the sweat of a harvest day's labour; then a timorous hand grasping the rope balustrade, an enormous boot, hob-nailed, clay-coloured, and a mere thread of a gaitered leg attached, a struggle, a little panting and creaking, and Ma'r S'one was landed on the shooting-floor.

CHAPTER VI.

NORA'S ENTREATY.

"But shame—but flight—a recreant's name to prove,
To hide in exile."

CAMPBELL.

NORA, better used to the mill-steps, rose up to Michael's view with her lantern in her hand, and her light about her gently, softly, as a mist from the hollows at harvest—a vision as wraith-like and tender as the unexpected image of the moon in dark waters, to eyes too full of tears to look upward for the moon herself.

Michael, who had been unable to look anywhere yet but down deeper and deeper into his great sorrow, finding suddenly this light and loveliness in its black depth, felt

his soul hushed, awed, and for the moment mysteriously comforted.

It was now that he felt for the first time, with strange joy, and almost with terror, that the sweetness of her presence to him was a fact that was to remain unchanged by all that had happened this day, and that being unchanged was too truly unchangeable.

He at once suffered over this feeling, and gloried in it. He gloried in it as the one unassailable treasure that neither Nora, nor Ambray, nor law could take from him, let all do their worst. He suffered over it because of the thought that it would be useless to him, as known but unreachable wealth to a starving man.

Nora did not approach any nearer than sufficed for her to set her lantern down, and then lifted her eyes and saw Michael looking like some half-human bat; for from the corner where he stood, the walls, with their crossed and recrossed laths, spread round him like dark, sinewy wings, of which his

figure, with its bowed head, and arms laid back, seemed the centre.

He strained back closer as she raised her eyes to his, catching her breath, and shuddering at the sight of him. She saw the misery in his eyes, but had no leisure from her own sorrow to give it notice or thought.

This sorrow—Michael's own gift—looking up at him from eyes so surrendered to it that it and their beauty seemed one strange light, so overcame him that the large drops fell from his own, making black spots in the flour dust on the floor.

“Why have you not gone?” asked Nora.

She spoke in a low voice, and sighed afterwards, as one watching by the dead speaks low, and then sighs, remembering how indifferent alike to silence and sound are the ears they guard.

Her voice was awful to Michael, bringing him suddenly into the secret chamber of her sorrow, and to the re-opened coffin where the young athlete lay, still challeng-

ing his last conqueror, matching the strength of his dead beauty and youth against the worms.

“Why have you not gone?” repeated Nora. This time she spoke wearily and reproachfully, as if wondering how he could retain her from a vigil so sad and sacred as her soul must keep that night.

“Gone!” echoed Michael, looking down on the black drops on the floor, and not knowing what he answered.

“Yes,” said Nora, with a yet more weary impatience; “I am surprised you are still here. You must know that it is better for you to be away out of his reach. You must know we shall have enough to bear. Go—pray go!”

“Go!” Michael again repeated after her.

“Yes; do you not understand? We wish you out of his way. There is danger for both of you while he knows where you are. We all feel you had better go. Now do you understand?”

"Yes, yes," answered Michael, clutching the rafters on either side of him, and pressing with his stooping shoulders and head against the walls and ceiling, till all the slight mill-top shook, and Ma'r S'one looked round, murmuring—

"'Cline our 'erts!'"

"I understand. It is expected I shall go—run away—escape—hide myself," murmured Michael.

"Certainly it is," answered Nora.

"Like a murderer," said Michael with excessive gentleness, but such anguish, that Nora, for the first time since she had been in the mill, had her attention drawn to him for his own sake. Stepping up to the floor, she saw his face fully, and its misery.

Michael perceived this, and was near falling upon his knees, and letting out all the longing of his soul for a little pity, but then he also saw that she no sooner had given him and his fearful plight this brief attention, than her own sorrow, growing jealous,

seized all her soul back again to itself, and its object ; and the impatient wringing of the hands, with which she turned away from him, he interpreted into the complaint, “Oh, why,—why should I be troubled with this man’s misery—have I not enough to bear—is it not unnatural that *I* should have to think of him—to pity him? Why does he not go out of the path of those he has bereaved so awfully ?”

This double change in her was watched by Michael with a wistfulness as patient and meek as it was intense.

At the last change he came from where he had stood, and taking up the lantern placed it in Ma’r S’one’s hesitating hands.

“ Hold it high now, Ma’r S’one,” he said ; “ and low when you are out—so—so when you pass the corner of the ten acre, and this way as you cross Stone Slip—be careful there.”

Then turning to Nora, he laid one hand on the wall and extended the other toward

the steps, with that gentle eloquence of gesture so un-English, and perhaps peculiar to himself.

“If it would be any real good to you, my going,” he said, “I would go ; but I know it would not ; he would never rest till—till the thing was brought before the world. Why not let it be ? Do not trouble—I will be my master’s keeper, as well as his prisoner. He shall come to no harm while he is doing this against me—and then——”

Nora looked up at him, stung by what she thought this wretched man’s folly, into something like curiosity, and repeating impatiently,

“And then ? ”

This look—the first that had ever come upon him from her—not questioning of others, but directed at himself, and at his fate solely—for the moment made Michael unable to speak. He lowered his eyes, that she might not see their great gratitude, and withdraw the cause of it in shuddering self-reproach.

"And then," he said, as soon as he could speak (strong self-control pressing on him made his voice as sweetly and truly modulated as the sound of some instrument at the touch of fingers full at once of tenderness and power); "then, when all is over, and he feels he has got justice—when he has had the law on me—he will be easier to manage—more satisfied and quiet. But do not trouble, he will get no hurt on my account, either from me or for me—unless I really did as you say—escape from him now—that would madden him."

A sense of conviction came to Nora, but she repelled it.

"This must not be," she said, looking up at him with eyes full of helpless distress.
· "As *he*—as George forgave you"—a mournful authority stole into her voice in saying this—"you shall not suffer the same as if he had not done so. You must know that. You must know his wish is sacred to us. For his sake, then," she added, more coldly

and imperiously, “ we wish you to go before more harm is done, before his name and life——”

She ceased, turning away her face ; then, again fronting Michael, said firmly—

“ And his *death* shall be brought in such a way before the world ! You must question no more what your duty is. You must go. Surely you will not—you dare not—refuse to do so, when you know we—I wish it—require it.”

“ You would be blamed,” said Michael gently. “ I would do what you wish, but that what I must do for your—your good, your peace, your best chance of peace, is different from that. No. It must be gone through with ; it is better it should be gone through with. I must stay. My master must find me here in the morning.”

“ I must send others to reason with you ; I cannot,” said Nora, drawing her shawl closer, and then, laying her hand on the rope balustrade, she turned away.

CHAPTER VII.

NORA'S LETTERS.

"O what a sigh she gave in finishing,
And look, quite dead to every worldly thing!"

KEATS.

MA'R S'ONE, ever since Michael gave him the lantern, had been painfully absorbed in trying to remember and to practise the lesson he had received as to its use, startling Nora and Michael, and making his own small eyes blink, by darting the light about in all directions.

When Nora began to descend the steps, he followed, holding the lantern so as to cast the light well behind him, and turning a look of almost frenzied anxiety on Michael, to see if he was acting according to his orders.

Michael quietly took it from him, and went down with it, giving it back into his eager but nervous hands at the mill-door.

Nora turned here suddenly, and looked at Michael.

He knew at once the thing he so dreaded was coming.

"Michael Swift," she said, "you have acted rather strangely with regard to myself once or twice. I should not have noticed it—*now* I must. I must ask you to tell me truly, as you would have your God deal mercifully with you in this great trouble that is on you, if you have been tempted to keep back some other message of George Ambray's than those you have given?"

Michael kept his eyelids lowered. He was not only suffering over the thought of how little comfort he could give her in his answer, but was feeling stung by her hint as to his having secret wishes of his own for withholding what comfort he might give.

"As to my having acted strangely to-

wards you," he said, after a moment's silence, "I surely need not remind you what a man's feelings must be at seeing one like yourself, setting all her earthly hope on what is no longer on the earth. As to your question—its hardness lies in its being too easy to answer." He paused, and added in a low voice—"I told *all* there was to tell."

As he said this he lifted his eyes, and showed them full of such profound and lowly sympathy and pity as made them more convincing than any words.

Nora turned her face towards the door, and moved her hand to open it with a gesture eloquent of grief freshly wounded.

Michael felt as if he had done some cruel act, and his lips opened with a sharp breath eager to unsay at any cost what had given such pain. Then he remembered that the truest kindness to this bereaved and stung spirit was to *compel* it to turn to the future for comfort, instead of leaving a false glamour over the past to chain it there.

With this thought, and in honest horror at the idea of Nora perhaps sacrificing her life to George's memory, he broke out too impetuously, standing with the door partly open, and his hand on the top of it, while Nora stood listening, her swollen lids half closed—

“ Oh, Miss Ambray ! ” he said at last, his voice and eyes full of reverence and pity, “ George could not understand you. Your letters, your beautiful letters—forgive me, but they were lost upon him. He knew that they were beautiful ; he said so to me often as he read them ; but——”

“ To *you*, ” cried Nora in haughty and sharp pain.

“ But,” continued Michael, not startled from his train of thought, “ he read those wise and beautiful, most beautiful passages of comfort, as if—as if it was from a book ; he read them, not—not taking them as—as a man perishing of thirst takes water—as sweet astonishing answers to those questions

that trouble and disappointment makes one ask one's self without any hope of having them answered.

" George was a boy ; he had not come to want these things you gave him. He suffered ; but as yet a little money that would make him welcome among his friends was what gave him most comfort, was what made him as happy as could be. A five-pound note in a letter was more to him than wise, beautiful words.

" He could not help it, any more than a child ; it was so ; it was his nature. He would say to me, ' Why, Michael, there's not a man in England gets such letters as I do. Bless her ! I'll put this by and read it to-morrow ; we mustn't lose a minute of this tide,' and there, upon his mantelpiece, the letter would be left, an evening, a day, sometimes two or three days, and I—I, who had been so wonderstruck, so lost and dumb in hearing him read the beginning as to make him look at me and say, ' Ah, poor old

Michael, *you* don't understand this sort of thing—I would have to see it there, to touch it in sorting his things, to hold it in my hand, open. Oh, it was then I knew for the first time I was a patient man."

"What of his letters?" asked Nora, hiding her sting under a look of angry suspicion. "Were all destroyed?"

"Destroyed!" repeated Michael, shrinking a little from the advance of the wandering ray of Ma'r S'one's lantern. "Yes, yes, his letters were destroyed."

"I asked you," said Nora, sternly, "were *all* his letters destroyed?"

If Michael had not known Ma'r S'one to be the most harmless creature in existence, he would certainly have strongly suspected him of "malice aforethought" at this moment, for his lantern light rested steadily on his face.

"A few—I think a few were—were not destroyed," he answered.

"Were these which were saved mine?" asked Nora.

"There might—yes, there might be some of yours, certainly. I could not say—not positively—to the contrary."

"Michael Swift, if *you* have these letters, give them to me."

"In the morning, then," answered Michael, scarcely to be heard. "I will give them in the morning."

"Have you them *here*?"

"In the morning," cried Michael imploringly. "I will give them in the morning."

"Have you them here?"

"Yes, they are here."

"Then give them to me instantly."

Ambray, in one of the fits of magnanimity common to most tyrants, had given up the huge deal desk in the corner of the ground-floor to Michael's exclusive use. To this Michael now went, and in a moment returned from it with a packet in his two hands, looking down at it as he came.

"Why!" exclaimed Nora the instant she saw them, "these *are* my letters—these are all my letters."

"Yes, these are *all* your letters."

He did not immediately give into her outstretched hand the packet, but held it, looking down on it, his chin on his breast.

"I have but two other books in the world," he said gently; "my Bible and my Shakespeare ; and this," he added, giving the packet into her hand with a smile, that seemed half light, half water in his eyes, "*this* was the key to both. I never understood them till *this* taught me how. Take it, take it ; the night's work is complete."

"You are a strange and most unfortunate man," said Nora, turning towards the door. "I can say no more ; others must reason with you about this perversity."

She went out sighing, with a sense of a sorrow that she could not look into, because of her own sorrow. And Ma'r S'one, after turning to Michael and crying with tremulous sympathy, but in a whisper, for fear of offending Nora, "O Ma'rs Michael, Lord ha' marcy 'pon us, and 'cline our 'erts to

keep this la'!" tottered after her, casting the light of his lantern brightly back into the mill.

"Ay, George, it is complete," cried Michael, looking up into the black, hot, starless night. "It is complete!"

CHAPTER VIII.

STARS IN THE RIFT.

"The night's dismay
Saddened and stunned the coming day."

COLERIDGE.

THOUGH Michael found himself acting as if he had resolved upon the course which he was taking, he had not really done so. He was not sure the morning would find him as he had told Nora it should—still in Ambray's power.

A strong instinct that it would do so had moved him to say what he had said to her; but when she was gone he considered her words, and Mrs. Ambray's, as to his flight, and fell into a state of tormenting and hopeless indecision.

Meanwhile he had a fearful sense of Time taking away stealthily and silently his only defences—the night and early morning hours.

Sleepless, and sick with fatigue and want of food, which he had not tasted since the bread fell from his hand when the reapers had passed at breakfast time, he sat and listened to the sharp rasping cry of the corncrake, and the chirping of the crickets, the only musicians awake to chant their shrill and jubilant harvest song.

Sometimes—but very seldom—a low rich murmur went through and through the corn, as if these noisy creatures had disturbed the earth's slumber, and made her heart sigh under its rich burden, and whisper “Hush !” And the whisper spread from field to field all over the dark undulations of the valley ; the wheat uttered it mellowly ; the barley rustled with it more than the wheat ; the rye whispered it more airily than all ; the long fields bore it to the sea ; the sea turned the small, low “Hush ” into a mighty one.

Michael, whose sorrow could not be "hushed," sat at the open mill-door, taking from the night that additional and profound dreariness which is so often found in the insensibility of outward things to human suffering.

In natures submissive and gentle like his, thought goes on still wonderingly and inquiringly under the greatest sorrow ; the mind lifts itself and looks with patience and awe on the new and dark world into which it is cast, and sees so much sooner than the passion-blinded mourner the small rifts in the clouds where stars may come, or the light on the horizon from which the day may break.

The first stars in the rifts that Michael's patient eyes beheld were the thoughts of his home, and of having at last some sympathy from those who, he felt, could but learn all he had suffered and was yet to suffer with amazement and pity.

More than this Michael did not expect

from his family, when the truth should be made known to them ; but the thought of this pity in the dear faces gave him of itself much comfort, having been denied all sympathy so long. It seemed to him that no sentence which could be passed on him could be so very hard when accompanied by his father's indignant protestations, his mother's silent, clinging embrace, his brothers' black, helpless, but sympathetic looks, and his little sister's tears and caresses.

These were the stars in the rifts ; but the sun might rise—there might be the deep, glad comfort of hearing that Nora herself was turning merciful towards him, as her grief grew less bitter and absorbing. She had friends and money at her command : who could tell what she might not do towards lessening his punishment ? And what so sweet as liberty coming by a gift from her hand ?

So sat this meek Daniel all the night,

guarding himself with humble and gentle hopes, against the lions of disappointment, injustice, terror, and despair, that crouched around him in the darkness.

CHAPTER IX.

AT DAYBREAK.

“ Now, ere the morn had streak’d with redd’ning light
The doubtful confines of the day and night ! ”

HOMER.

THE morning came, not yet with any sound of human life and work, but that first dewy glory of the day so seldom seen except by the eyes that wake to suffering or lonely toil.

Michael’s spirit, which had known communion with so many of these hours, gazed up even on this daybreak with the shrinking tenderness of a child at the aggrieved eyes of a beautiful mother teaching him with tears that pain must be given him for his good.

This warm and lovely morning, like a mother indeed, took Michael from the black nurse night ; and with the fresh songs of her bright lips, and the warmth and light of her smile, that awakened the rest of the world, soothed *him* to the sleep he so much needed.

The morning came—the working morning, with the ring of the anvil, the creaking of cottage gates and draw-wells, and the chopping and breaking of faggots.

When Michael opened his eyes, the first thing they saw was a face at the window, looking in upon him with an expression which brought all the truth at once to his mind. The face belonged to a labourer of Mrs. Moon's ; he had seen it at the Team on the first day of his arrival at the High Mills, and now the sight of it instantly brought to his recollection the kind of terror he had had in looking on the assembled faces that day, and in wondering what judges

their owners would prove if his strange case should ever come before them.

They had stared at him then with no more regard for what he thought than if he had been a dog. This morning, when face after face closed up the window, as the signal was passed that Michael was awake, there was the same expression, accompanied with one of blank unhesitating abhorrence.

He rose, and for the first time since his confession felt a passion for escape, for release from the torture preparing for him.

At this movement, and at his wild glance round, figures filled up the door, and he knew he no longer had any choice as to keeping his promise to his master.

He sat down again, only wondering now what the time was, how long it would be before half-past nine, when Dynely, the carrier, would drive up his tilted cart to the Team.

CHAPTER X.

TO PRISON.

“ To weep is to make less the depths of grief ;
Tears, then for babes, — — — revenge for me.”

SHAKSPEARE.

MANY a morning had Michael watched the loading and the slow laborious setting forth of this one and only public conveyance to and from Lamberhurst and the Bay. He had heard of it before he came to the High Mills. George had made him laugh with his description of its progress and adventures on the few occasions when necessity had obliged him to make use of it. Little had he thought to hear the words “ Dynely’s cart,” which had always been uttered with a smile by George, used by his father at

such a moment, and with such meaning, as he had done last night.

Was it nine yet? he wondered, or had he even more than half an hour to sit here with these eyes upon him? He forgot, as people under great mental suffering do forget, that half his sickness and deathly fear was caused by want of food and common physical exhaustion. He thought all his suffering was caused by the horror of his position, and so was all the more alarmed for himself and his fortitude during the days that were to come.

With a breath of relief he looked up when he heard a stir amongst his gaolers, and one of them announced, in a low excited voice,

“Here be Armbray!”

From the lethargic excitement, mutterings, and nudgings that ensued, Michael understood that there was something even more noticeable than the approach of his master being watched, and presently saw that the old man was not alone.

He had obtained an order for Michael's

arrest, and two men to take charge of him to London.

Mrs. Ambray came behind them with some breakfast for the prisoner; which it was reported all over Lamberhurst, with righteous horror, he thanked her for, and ate and drank "like a Christian."

Ambray, as he approached his servant, and delivered him up to the men he had brought, neither looked nor avoided looking at Michael's face, raised towards him with a wistful curiosity, in which there was no reproach, no consciousness of self at all.

Mrs. Ambray stood watching Michael eat the food she had brought with no more feeling for him on her white, absorbed, and pain-drawn face, than if he had been a dog that she was feeding.

Michael, as he looked at her and saw this, thought the bread he was eating must choke him. They had been such friends—once or twice she had said to him "my son," giving him, all unconsciously, a foretaste of the

greatest joy and triumph he ever wished to know in this life—the triumph of being called “my son” by Ambray when all should be known, the heavy penalty paid, the pardon earned and rendered.

As for Ambray, it was easy to see he only now lived and breathed in his purpose of punishing his son’s destroyer—of “having the law upon him.”

“It will cheat me; it will give me as little as it dares, I know,” he had said to his wife; “it always does. But what I *can* have out of it, I *will*, and then—*then I'll leave him to God.*” And with what prayers for divine vengeance he would do this, his voice and thickening veins across his brow avowed.

“Leave him to God *now*, John,” Mrs. Ambray had implored. “You hear what they all say, how little his punishment can be except from his own conscience. Oh, stay and comfort your poor dear heart—and *me*. I do think you forget I *am* that

lad's, that precious angel's mother, I really do!"

Ambray turned upon her impatiently, opening his mouth to ask her how she supposed he could have endured her existence near him so long if it had not been for his remembrance of this fact; but seeing her pathetic old eyes caught the sense of his words before they were uttered, was satisfied, and he shut his mouth again without speaking.

In answer to another appeal from his wife and niece together, he had cried out, trembling all over at the very idea of the inaction they advised—

"Why, why, one would think you were mad! What in the world *could* I do if I did *not* prosecute this man? Sit here, walk out, lie down at night, live on this land that was my father's, hearing—as I should—no sheep bleat but what would mind me of our last lamb of the fold crying out to me in death! Seeing with my failing sight nothing

but *him*"—and Ambray had started, and seemed actually looking on the vision that he called up, and trembling as if in the very presence he imagined—"but *him*, my pale boy, bled to death, white, beckoning me with his flower, as white. Oh, Esther! Oh, Nora! *You* have cost me this! Say no more, oppose me no more!

So Michael, and his two new acquaintances, and Ambray, met the astonished carrier at the Team, and were made room for in the tilted cart, among the parcels, baskets, and two women, each with a brood of small sun-bonnets and infantine smocks.

From amidst these Michael's eye soon drew a little friend to sit upon his knee, and be a shield for his stooping face against the glances of such wayfarers as might chance to know him.

Sitting cramped under the tilt of Dynely's cart, Michael, from behind his little golden-

haired shield, lifted his eyes to take their last look at the High Mills.

Though now quite still, while all their kindred, standing few and far between on the faint horizon, kept up a dreamy motion, the High Mills looked instinct with life that morning, not unlike, Michael thought, two vigorous gigantic grasshoppers braced ready for a leap.

How different all was from what it had been that March day when he first came into the village. He had thought his new world wonderful enough then—and indeed its beauty had been great—but at that time it was like some lovely beggar maiden sparingly clad and fed, her green gown patched with russet, her sweet breath fitful and uncertain, now wild, now soft.

Since then, like a rich prince, had come the summer, and married her; arraying her in golden harvest robes, and lavishing upon her all the glories of his kingdom.

Through a slit in the tilt Michael's great

eyes, worn and sad, but moist with goodwill and liking, took his last look ; and he bore the picture with him, and often saw it afterwards in prison.

Yes, in the exercise-yard at morning, beyond the cropped heads and listless figures, in all their uniform and insignia of vice and sorrow ; beyond the little band of the defeated soldiers of sin, bent on their monotonous and inglorious march ; beyond the white walls that grow close, and become as a film upon the eyeball, and press in upon the very soul ; beyond or through all this would rise that fair, green world.

In all its August glory it would come before him ; the woods spreading up the hill-side in great dark masses ; no foliage, no separate form, nor any variety of colour apparent, but only the dull, soft, velvety undulating ground ; the swelling corn-fields, and those farm-clusters, for the soft russet tints of which George Ambray's eyes had

yearned in death; the little thatched cottages, each with its stack of faggots near it, almost as big as itself, reminding one of a white straw-hatted master and black naked serf; the emerald meadows speckled with sheep; and over all such glorious abundance and warmth of colour, such fervour and excess of it in spots and on things where no human artist would dream of expending his skill. Round all rose the soft line of hills against the sky, like a new wave of earth just up-gathered, faint-tinted, humid, as if light shone through them.

On these and over all were the mills, looking scarcely like fixtures at all, but newly alighted, busy-winged creatures, incidental to the time of year, to the season of the corn.

Michael did not think of bearing it away to be his prison picture, as he looked at it from the tilted cart; he thought of the harvest, of the contrast it was to *his*

harvest which he was reaping from that little grain of hope he had sown here, and looked for through all the summer, and which had come up such a bitter tare.

The possession of that hope had been the only thing which had seemed to render life supportable since George's death ; and now he was obliged to own, as he glanced at Ambray, that it had been an unnatural one ; that all his struggle had been against the laws of nature.

So all now was over. The stain must be left upon the mill-stone ; heaven would send him no such wind as should enable him to grind it out. George's old father and mother must be left childless and servantless ; and he who would have been their son and their servant must bear in his soul for ever the reproach and bitterness of their thoughts of him—of their loneliness.

Michael had no fear about his trial ; indeed, he looked forward to it with that

kind of melancholy satisfaction with which a neglected member of a family will sometimes regard the idea of a long illness, because of its bringing him for a time the constant remembrance and attention of those for whose sympathy he yearns.

It was the only comfort now left to him—that thought of the return to those primitive, simple, unvarnished affections, whose strength, it seemed to him, must outlive all changes.

For a little while his bruised, stunned heart might give itself up to the exquisite comfort of keen sympathy, of passionate solicitation, from the dear hearts too unsophisticated and rough for feigning.

All through that hot and dreary drive among the parcels, smocks, and sun-bonnets, this quiet prisoner beguiled the time with imaginary looks, acts, and conversations of the large family in the tiny house at Thames Dutton, when all should be known there.

The thought that his father could feel anything but horror and sympathy at knowing all he had suffered at the time of Grant's death, never occurred to trouble him. He only pictured him and his mother trembling for his life, while his brothers would disperse in twos and talk of him, and sweet little Cicely would cry by herself till some of them found and comforted her.

Dear old home! dear old times! thought Michael; there would be but the few, few years in prison—there *could* not be many—and then all would come back again—the solid honest life, with its solid, honest pleasures, and the High Mills and their story become but as a dream.

CHAPTER XI.

CONVICTED.

“ I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me : refuge failed me ; no man cared for my soul.”

PSALMS.

THE sails of the High Mills hung motionless for seven weeks.

Michael’s trial was more wearisome than exciting to all but himself, his old father, and the miller.

Bardsley, when found and summoned as a witness, showed the greatest amazement at hearing that George had been really killed in the struggle. He gave his evidence with great caution, as though his gratitude to Michael demanded that he should do all he could in his favour; his anxiety to

please the father-in-law of Polly made him fearful of saying too much against George.

The first that Nora and Mrs. Ambray heard of George's marriage was from the newspaper which Mrs. Moon sent up from the farm by Ma'r S'one. Nora was scarcely even surprised; it seemed easier to believe in such a thing in connection with George than with Michael. And yet, though scarcely a surprise, it was a blow, a long-expected, crushing blow. No sweetness was left for her in her past, for all that she had thought sweet was proved a dream, an unreality, a deceit.

She tried hard to put off the blackness that her life was thus suddenly clad in. In this her unselfish nature helped her unconsciously. She waited on George's mother, crowning *her* grief with homage, and keeping her own silent and lowly. She planned what they must do to teach the blind girl how to become a daughter indeed to her husband's father.

Mrs. Ambray could not be brought to see the necessity for this, and was greatly averse to it.

Polly, however, spared her this ordeal by taking fright at the idea of being called into court as a witness, and disappearing, so that all Bardsley's half-frantic efforts to find her were in vain.

How often Michael wondered, months afterwards, if they had met; or if the two still wandered apart through the miserable winter days, in their great darkness, like two lost familiar spirits seeking each other after death!

Michael had going on, apart from his trial for the death of George Ambray, a trial of a kind which few perhaps are called upon to undergo, and which ends in either giving the person so tried great and peculiar advantages over the rest of his fellow-creatures, or in utterly ruining him.

The result of this second trial of Michael's was not known to himself or to

any one on earth at the time when he received his sentence for the manslaughter of George Ambray, and was taken to prison. All he knew himself yet was that his hold on hope and faith had been beaten off as it were finger by finger.

It was not that his case had been dealt with hardly. While caring very little *how* it went, Michael could not help feeling all through it a certain dull surprise at the leniency with which his great error was regarded by the world. It seemed to him that if he had heard his father read all this that went on from day to day so wearily as old Swift used to read out such cases, with the vague idea that no law proceeding could be *quite* legal without his judgment being passed upon them—it seemed to Michael that if he had heard his own case so read, he would have thought the prisoner ought to consider himself peculiarly fortunate in his trial. The truth was, that Michael, at the end of all, when he heard he

was only to be imprisoned for six months, even suffered a shock at the knowledge that he would be so soon in possession of the liberty for which there seemed no use in all the world.

In *this* darkness no stars in the rifts gleamed for his wild and wandering gaze. For, indeed, when he had lifted his eyes trustingly and gratefully, to look for them in the time of his great need, they had all fled. He found himself denied all sympathy in his own flesh and blood. By some strange freak of his weak intellect, ever supported by his strong obstinacy, old Joseph Swift was led into condemning his son as something a few degrees better than a murderer; and, being despotic ruler over all judgments in his own house, forced the whole family to regard him in the same light, to their great wretchedness.

Michael's spirit was so stunned and sickened within him when this state of things revealed itself, that he scarcely knew or

cared what was going on around him in the court where he stood so many hours, listening like one in a dream.

The most interesting features of the trial was the contrast in the position of the two fathers.

With obstinate martyrdom in his rosy little face, blue eye, sleek silver hair, stood Joseph Swift—one of the many silly ensigns that make themselves a nuisance on life's battle-field by persisting in clutching the wrong colours to the death. Conscious rectitude, and high-minded indifference as to results, made him feel himself a hero, too great to be ever appreciated on earth; though all the time his foolish old heart ached at the sight of Michael standing so patient, reproachless, vaguely wondering.

How different the old miller looked! No blameless and clear conscience lent such light to his hollow eye, and firmness to his tall, shaking form. Trembling constantly, now leaping up, now sinking prostrate, at

one moment brightening and listening in passionate hope when the evidence against the prisoner seemed growing serious, at the next bent double, grinding one clenched hand in the palm of the other, he would mutter, "My boy! my boy! May he get justice in heaven, for he never will here!"

But infinitely worse than the loss of the vengeance for which he thirsted was the ill fame that rose, obscuring the brightness of his idol, and that in so doing showed Michael's character more and more honest and spotless in all but the one stain. It nearly maddened Ambray to think that he was there defending his son with such passionate vehemence, and a not too great regard for truth, yet proving him less worthy at every step, while "that absurd old Swift," with all his severity, only brought moré light to shine on Michael's good life. It was bitter, too, beyond expression, for him to feel that his own faith in Michael had become stronger than any

one's; that even whenever a suspicion of dishonesty or meanness of any kind rested on Michael for a moment in the course of the trial, Ambray had always a hateful confidence in its being instantly removed, or at least unmerited.

When all was over, and the sentence passed, Ambray threw up his arms, and with fearful looks and words called for a higher judgment on the prisoner, and fell down in a fit.

Michael's face was turned towards him, and appeared almost without expression except for a strained look in his eyes.

Most people who saw him thought his heart had hardened—that he had grown careless—but a lawyer who happened to know a little of a law higher than that he professed, remarked as the prisoner left the dock—

“That man will come out of prison an angel or a devil.”

CHAPTER XII.

HOME.

“ Wheel me into the sunshine,
Wheel me into the shadow.
Are there any buds on the wood-bine ?
Is the king-cup crowned in the meadow ? ”

DOBELL.

IT was April, and Michael had been at home some time feeble and helpless, after his six months' captivity.

“ What's Tom put Michael right in the sun for like that ? ” demanded old Swift angrily. “ Go and wheel him a little into the shade, Henry.”

“ There now, you've put him just where the wind catches him. Here, I'll go myself.”

“ How you fidget over Michael,” said

Mrs. Swift, as old Joseph returned from poking Michael's head about, jerking his weak arms, and making him thoroughly uneasy—"and I'm sure he's coming round wonderful."

"*Is he, Maria?*" returned Swift, something unusual twinkling in his excitable little blue eyes. "You should have seen him and heard him in church last Sunday, when he was singing out 'Lord, now let'st,'—I couldn't stand it, Maria. I collared him, and pushed him down in his seat. I felt as if he was a-singing himself off."

"What fancies you do get in your poor head, Joseph!"

"We shall lose him," answered Swift, turning sharply on his heel—"fancy or no fancy."

This time of feebleness, and rest, and clumsy cherishing, had its own sweetness; and when it was over, and the bit of life in him, at first faint as the young leaves and

callow fledglings, was nursed into strength — peace took wings and fled. The strong pulsations of the body woke the mind from its long trance to new activity and suffering.

Every day of the long week was wearying enough, but Sunday was the one which brought his severest trial. The day on which, at the High Mills, he had always seen Nora, and drawn fresh power of endurance from the sweet patience of her face, was now a bitter, barren day to him.

On that day would always arrive several of his married brothers, with their wives and children, all trying to look kindly on the one great failure and disappointment of the family—himself.

When the day came, and the cloth was laid, and the little parlour was crammed with nephews, and nieces, and sisters-in-law, whom poor Michael had never seen till then, when it buzzed with all kinds of family interests, great and little, from

Tom's chances of entering into partnership with his master, to the propensity of Mary's baby for being fretful on Sundays, Michael felt himself like a great useless hulk in the midst of a gay regatta.

His brothers spoke to him kindly enough, but very little ; and he did not blame them. What was there to talk about to a failure, a wreck like him ? They were a little ashamed of him too, he saw, before their smart wives ; even little Cicely had placed herself and her friend, with a rose in his button-hole, as far from her favourite brother as possible, for fear some prison sign might yet be detected on him.

Here he was back in the midst of all, yet never had he felt more isolated from them.

Their small hopes stung his great despair ; their small joys made the depths of his great sorrow apparent to him. What was his life to turn to ? A place in the little churchyard, where George had been so

early sent by him, seemed to Michael the likeliest and most-to-be-desired change from this recent dreary helplessness and apathy.

CHAPTER XIII.

RECRUITS FOR THE "HOPP'N."

"In such a company as this,
A tale so tragic seems amiss."

LONGFELLOW.

"WELL, Ma'r S'one, so t'hopp'n begins o'
Toosday. Think the weather 'll bear out?"

Ma'r S'one, whose back formed one of a row of backs visible through the long latticed window of the Team, first lowered with difficulty, and rested on his knee, the pint pewter mug, from which he had been drinking for the sake of "peace and quiet;" then, after trembling with diffidence at the honour of being addressed instead of any one of his neighbours, and after glancing timidly on either side of him to see if any one had taken offence at it, or would like to

answer in his stead, looked up and replied, with studied cheerfulness—

“Yees, we begin hopp’n o’ Toosday, Ma’rs Dynely. Missis be dunned her hirin’—a pretty middlin’ fair lot—she’s got this year—not quite so rough as laarst. As fur weather, Ma’rs Dynely, there be rain somewheres, and we must hope the Arlmighty ull be over wi’ it ’fore Toosday; but ‘cline our ’erts.”

“I arlwis say as a wet hopp’n’s onlucky,” remarked a neighbour of Ma’r S’one’s in a slate-grey smock, and with as sombre a countenance.

Ma’r S’one looked as much impressed as possible, murmuring in a very low voice, lest any one else should object to the remark,

“Sure?”

“Why, rain don’t do t’hops no heert as I’ve heered tell on,” observed another of the window row, smiling with one eye, and with but one side of his mouth, as his pipe was in the other, and wagging his head at the end

of Dynely's whip, as if he saw there more support to his argument than he cared to let out all at once. "Not as *I've* ever heard tell on, it didn't."

"Sure?" said Ma'r S'one again, as deferentially as he had done to the other speaker.

"What say yourself, Ma'r S'one?" asked Dynely, placing himself opposite the door, that he might watch the tilted cart, and great white horse given to backing, by which he was drawing upon himself the indignation of the several dogs waiting for their masters outside the Team, and the gentler comments of the hens dozing under the holly hedge; "what say—yourself—Ma'r S'one?"

Ma'r S'one, thus appealed to, looked as startled and bewildered as a little boy at the bottom of the class suddenly asked a question which those at the top cannot answer.

At last he got up, and taking his long

fork, and seeking forgiveness in every eye for his presumption, answered—

“Well, Ma’rs Dynely, I don’t want fur to goo an’ fly in nobody’s face, I don’t—but ’cernin’ the hops and the rain, ’cernin’ them I caan’t, I really caan’t say as it doos em any good. No, Ma’rs Dynely, I caan’t; and if the Lord ’ill be over wi’ it ’fore Toosday—not as *I’d* interfere—’cline our erts! No.”

“Doos t’hops no heert, a little rain don’t,” persisted the smoker at the window, still keeping his eye on Dynely’s whip in its changed position, and still smiling as if he said, “You may move my argument about, but *I* can find it.”

“Well,” remarked another of the row in the window, with the tone of one about to start an entirely new idea, “what *I* say is—myself I doos—is as th’ rain farls th’ haarest on the pickers.”

“That bees it, sir,” averred Ma’r S’one, shaking his head sadly; “it farls haarest

on the pickers and the measurer." (Ma'r S'one himself was Mrs. Moon's measurer.) " See th' old people it gives the rheumatis—the rain does—and put 'em out, and they can't pick so quick. And the young folks they comes to look out for to get married, and the rain spoils the bunnets and arl that, and *they* don't pick so quick; and then when comes measuring time, the measures bean't what they s'pected, and they arl farls on me, old and young they doos, and it's 'Look how that old Ma'r S'one's been cheatin',' and tells me I'm gett'n too old to do the measurin' 'tarl fair, and did ort to give it up—and if I gives a shake more, just for peace and quiet, there's missis ready to rail out: 'Ma'r S'one, Ma'r S'one, be this a charity hop-garden, as you bees tassin' up the measures like that?'"

Ma'r S'one's difficult position during the hop-picking season was considered over in silence.

Conversation was slow at this hour of

the afternoon, when the September sun was blazing on the heads and backs at the Team window, and the hens kept up an intermittent comfortable grumble under the hedge of the garden across the road, while the cat, like a jungle tiger, sprang about among the lettuce and herb beds, to eye them from different points of view, making a rustling in the crisp vegetables.

Sometimes an observation would be made, or a question put, by one of the lethargic loungers in the little bar-room, and not replied to till some cart-wheels, to which all had listened, had been waited for, and had passed, and their sound died away.

“ Poor old Ambray’s had a time av it since this end o’ laast year,” remarked the carrier, “ when I brought him home in my caart after lawin’ that Michael Swift.”

A lumbering sound was heard along the Tidhurst road, and listened to until it turned into the lane at the church fields towards the large hop-gardens

"Yees," said some one full ten minutes after the last remark had been made. "They say—I dun know who *was* a-saying—were it you, Ma'r S'one?—somebody was a-sayin' they bin pooty nigh starvin' this laarst month."

Ma'r S'one only sighed out his favourite entreaty, and shook his head sadly.

"Old Armbray won't have nothin' to do with Miss Nara, or she wouldn't let 'em want—not she," said the carrier.

"Be this true, Ma'r S'one," inquired Ma'r. S'one's next neighbour, "'bout old Ambray and Esther a-goin' hoppin' down at your missis's?"

"Yees," answered Ma'r S'one, turning up the end of his fork, and shaking his head, as he stared at it with watery eyes. "It be true 'nough; they come to arst her to let 'em arn a little this hopp'n."

The Tuesday was as fine a September day as ever dawned upon the moving poles,

—sun-bonnets and brown hands busy at earliest light.

An hour later the tall old couple came, leaning on each other, to take their place and task in the busy garden.

Both their hands shook as they first touched the hops.

Esther meekly gathered hers: but Ambray's hand fell as if it had been burnt, and he lifted his face, and looked up through the lovely garland, in an ecstasy of bitterness.

CHAPTER XIV.

STILL MOURNED.

“ My heart, sweet boy, shall be thy sepulchre,
 For from my heart thine image ne'er shall go.
 My sighing breast shall be thy funeral bell.”

SHAKSPEARE.

FEW changes but those brought by the seasons had come to Lamberhurst during the year which had elapsed since Michael left it.

It is true Ma'r S'one had, this hop-picking time, to be content with side views only of the weather when he came out to open the oast-house doors in the morning, his back being now so much bent as to render any other view impossible. But while such glimpses showed him fair

skies, he was infinitely thankful, and ready to endure the grumbling of the pickers with surprising patience.

Perhaps, too, the grey-walled church had a few more of those tiny dents with which it was covered, as if through Time having let so many of his baby years cut their teeth on it.

As for the High Mills themselves, they reflected, as mills will do, the fortunes of their master. The white one wanted but a background of snowy clouds to render its soiled chalky hue positively ghastly. The black mill had changed its state of slow decay to one of such rapid ruin, that poor Ambray could half suspect it of making suicidal attacks on itself in the night; or of being the victim of some furious Quixote, for whose tracks across the barley the miller looked with half suspicious eyes, as he came forth yawning wearily in the face of the rising sun.

All the year he had worked harder than he had ever done in his life.

After the prostration that had made his days all like one long dark dream for weeks after Michael's trial, there had come with returning strength a passionate desire to hide his feebleness and his broken heart from the world which he considered to have used him so cruelly.

It should see, he told himself, whether or not his boy's mother had need to depend on the "unpunished murderer" for her daily bread.

It should see that *he* at least was not crushed to the earth with shame at the fall of his idol. He would show it that he gloried still in his son's memory—that no revelations had yet, nor ever could lessen his love for him, or lay low his pride.

In the winter evenings he had sat with the Bible that had belonged to his great-grandfather open before him—not seeking in it any comfort, but only gazing at the beloved name—the last of the long list on each of the two pages recording births and

deaths ; and dreaming of the time when scornful eyes should see the sabbath sun shine in upon that name on the church wall, just over where its owner used to bend, or lift in prayer or song, his careless comely face.

The “nest egg” of the store for this cherished purpose was taken from the first money that came into his hand after the trial, and was hidden in the mill where none but himself could find it. It would not do to tell Esther. He might fall ill, and she would at need take it for his comfort.

He had in truth almost ceased talking to her about George ; he thought her grief was too soon lost in care for himself ; and he was embittered against her for this, though he took all her care as his due.

Yet there were times when he would almost exult in the thought that he *only* —the father to whom George had cried out at his death—he *only* loved him still beyond all things. He was eager to cherish

his own joyless life that the young man's name might not yet die out of the world, "for when I am in the grave," he said, "who will speak well of him? The mother who bore him forgets him; the woman who was nearly his wife is already comforted, and again happy; his friends who led him astray—of them who hears anything?—while as for *me*, my very food and drink is still to me as his funeral cake and wine—I drink to him, I eat to him, I get up in the morning and force my limbs and pains into my clothes, and work and win my daily bread that his only mourner may remain yet a little longer in the world, in case that out of heaven, or worse still, out of hell, my boy should look back and see himself forgotten—so soon."

Therefore, the great mill-sails laboured round for George, lying a stranger in the churchyard at Thames Dutton, as they had laboured round for him when he sat, a little flaxen-headed child, clapping his hands

at them ; the difference being that then a broad ruddy face would often come to the mill-window and look down with fondly concealed love and pride, while *now* a white face would come there and look up with eyes on whose bitter waters the same love and pride, all wounded as they were, rode boldly still, like two defiant war-maimed ships upon a troubled sea.

People thought all the first half of the year, how well the old man bore himself in his bereavement, how steadily he worked, how little he complained of his ailments, to what he used to do.

But in time a change came over him. Instead of rising in the morning immediately he woke, and seizing on his clothes with trembling, resolute fingers, he would sit up and stare at the light, then fall back on his pillow, letting the cold, sluggish tears creep from his unwincing eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WOLF AT THE DOOR.

“ Nor earth to give me food, nor heaven light.”

SHAKSPEARE.

THE *comfort* which Ambray's own devotion to his son's memory had given him was beginning to leave him, though the devotion itself did not change. The idea of living and working on purpose to honour George's name was one which time robbed of its tenderness and tangibility. Recollection began to fail ; the beloved image grew faint, so faint that the eyes of his soul ached with straining to see it ; it was dying from him—he was being left alone. He had been almost content to live for the sake of a shade—a spectre—that he thought at least would be

with him always ; and now *that* was vanishing ; the very echo of the voice he had so loved was growing silent—the faint sweetness of the fallen rose was leaving the dead leaves, passionately as he tried to retain it.

He could scarcely now remember things about his son which Esther had thought it impossible for him to forget ; and whenever he discovered this to be the case he suffered frightfully. He showed unwonted gratitude when his wife recalled to his memory things about George concerning which he was confused in this manner.

“ Thank you, Esther,” he would say, laying his shaking hand on hers ; “ thank you—yes, you’re right. Oh ! I remember now ; don’t let me forget that again, Esther ; don’t, for God’s sake, let me forget it again.”

Finding as he did the grave’s victory growing greater every day—hearing as he did only a deeper silence each time his soul listened and knocked at those doors of awful mystery that had closed on all he loved—

he sat down and contemplated the black, sunless world, aghast and helpless like a child left in the dark.

He could not work ; but for his wife's toil both might have starved. He was furious at the thought of help from Nora, whom he charged with utter falsity and fickleness because she did not die, or continue to wear mourning for George. Neither would he knowingly receive anything beyond what he considered his due from Mrs. Moon, who had refused to help him in the prosecution of Michael.

He did not mind the thought of starving himself—as for his wife, he did not think about her. Sometimes, when his breath left him in a fit of coughing, he hoped it might never come back again. If his foot slipped on the mill-steps, he regretted he had not fallen and been killed. He wooed death, and found it, as its wooers generally do, the bitterest of coquettes.

The only star that ever shone for him in

all the blackness of life was a lurid and baleful one enough. It was the thought of Michael, of some possible revenge; and the darker his life grew the more this attracted and charmed him, though it was so far off as to cause him to gnash his teeth and moan at it, like a madman through the bars of his cage at the unreachable object for which he wishes.

The goodness that had attached itself to Michael's name at the trial was now the chief theme of Ambray's thoughts—memory in losing its grasp of George became strong in its hold on Michael—not one good trait in his character was forgotten, or ever failed in being thought over to feed and nourish the hatred which was now as strong a passion as the old man's grief.

He mentioned his name to no one. None guessed the thoughts with which he beguiled the long hours as he sat in the house before his fireless grate, or out in the sun under the motionless mills.

Old Esther, looking up from her work at him, would shed many a tear for the faithful servant he had lost. Once, when Ambray sat with his long face framed in his bony fingers, staring at the still sails with their coverings wrapt about them in shroud-like fashion, his wife said to him with tears—

“ Ah, John, what would you give to see 'em going round again, and hear that Michael clamping up and down the stairs, with his great gruff voice singing his '*Heigh, Will! and ho, Will! whistle for a breeze!*'—or his great easy figure lolling there in the doorway? ”

Ambray dropped his hands from his face and gazed up at her as she stood beside him. It was clear he realized the picture vividly. Then he got up and walked round the mill several times, looking up at it often, and was unusually excited all the rest of the day.

It was just before the hop season that

Esther one morning, while waiting upon her husband, suddenly fell down, and lay at his feet, supporting herself on her elbow, and gasping faintly.

"Why, what's the matter now?" asked Ambray, recoiling, with the bandage that she had been binding round his rheumatic arm hanging half off. "What's the matter with the woman now?"

"Oh, dear!" moaned Esther faintly. "I'm afraid, John, I've gone too low."

"Too low!" repeated Ambray. "Yes, I should think you had. I want to know what you've gone so low for?"

"Oh, dear! I'm afraid, John—don't worrit yourself—but I'm afraid it's for want of food."

"For want of food!" echoed the miller, putting his hand to his forehead and looking down at her in feeble perplexity. "Why, how's that, Esther? You're dreaming, woman. If it was *that*—*I* should be bad too. *I'm* not hungry. *I've* had enough."

Esther smiled as her elbow gave way, and her cheek touched the brick floor.

"Yes, dear," she said, "that's it. You've had it *all* these two days. God bless you!"

It was this little scene that had led to M'ar S'one's good heart being pained by the sight of the old couple coming to ask his mistress to allow them to join in the hop-picking.

CHAPTER XVI.

HOP-PICKING AT LAMBERHURST.

“ By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept.”

PSALMS.

MRS. MOON'S hop-picking lasted just a fortnight.

During this season nearly all Southdownshire seems to abandon itself to a kind of hop idolatry. The small village shops are mostly open only for an hour early in the morning, and then closed till dusk, and any chance customers seeking admittance are told from some upper window, or neighbouring door, that its owner “bees gone a-hoppin’;” the informant being generally a cripple, or too aged a person to go a-hopping likewise.

As early as five o'clock in the morning one may see on the high parts of the roads, or hear in the misty hollows, the family parties proceeding in their carts, with dangling kettles and sleepy children, to the different hop-gardens. Scarcely a child is to be met without hops in its hat, or a paper of the worms they call "hop-dogs" in its hands. The cottage chimneys are smokeless all day, the hardy monthly roses—Southdownshire's autumn glory—vivid scentless scarlet, and sweet pink—open and beat themselves to death unnoticed on the latticed windows and still doors. While one looks and wonders at the stillness and desertion, the very sparrows on the thatch-edge seem trying to explain its cause, to express in dumb show the fact that the inmates are "gone a-hopping."

Most of the gardens seem strangely out of the way and secluded, but whether through the trees having begun to thin, or whether the eye at this season naturally looks for

them, the oast-houses certainly have a prominence and importance in the landscape they never had before throughout the year. Perhaps the faint odours of the hops themselves issuing from these is after all the true reason of this. Whatever it may be, there they are, consequential, and looking like an old woman shawled and bonneted for some important mission.

The last day of Mrs. Moon's hopping was as fine as the first; but some heavy rain intervening, had given what Ambray called a "sharp edge" to his cough, and he had much difficulty in keeping to his task through the day.

In the afternoon, when the pickers divided into little tea parties, he and Esther sat alone, just outside the poles, to eat their bread and drink their bottle of cold tea, that they might be refreshed for the last two hours of picking.

On one side of them the incessant gossip went on, at the other a little stream of water trickled cheerily down the hill.

Ambray sat staring into this water as he ate, his face averted from the poles. Esther's eyes were fixed on him, though she inclined her ear a little to catch the bit of news and the gossip which, while she had life, must needs have interest for her.

Ambray had noticed this, and was letting contempt for woman's frivolity and weakness swell the bitterness that already filled his soul, without being conscious that he was himself listening; the difference being that *his* ears received the men's remarks only, while Esther's heard but the shriller voices of her own sex.

If both had remembered and repeated what they listened to, as they paused after their meal, before getting up, they would have given each a totally different account from the other.

Esther's would have been this,—

“ I waant a frock fur little Ann ; be woilit fash'ner'bul, think you ? ”

"Well, *I* bees goin' to have brown meriny for *my* two gals."

"Bees you? well, you do s'prise me. But now I wants somethin' downright oncommon fur 'ur. Set up, Miss, and leave aarf throwin' thy 'op-dogs in my tea, will you! See, she's a goo'n to school next week, and there's sich mischief as never wur if a child fin's itself worse dressed than the others, so I waant fur 'ur to have somethin' reel fash'ner'bul an' good—like what none o' the rest—they White's child'n and arl them caant get. I thart a nice woilit——"

"I'm s'prised now as you fancies wilit. Your 'usband's sister's got one."

"Noo!"

"She bees."

"Who telled you?"

"Jane—she wur pickin' down at Leweses, side o' old Mary Vidler."

"Oh, my 'ert! *I* bees glad you telled me, naasty mischief-maakin' thing; *I* bees sick of her naame! My 'usband's just been over

theer, and caan't tark o' nothing else. Noo, I won't have a woilit if I know it."

" Movver, I *waants* a wilit. You said I'd hev a wilit if you picked a bin."

" Then you won't hev it, Miss. You put that theer doll's 'ead in that teapot agin ! Likely I'll pick a bin or aarf a bin wi' *you* to mind. She's ben arl set on woilit 'cause she see Miss Armbray in one yest'y."

" Not down at her aunt's, sure ? I wur telled she wouldn't speak to her agin."

" Who telled you that ? "

" Orrey Smith heerd it up at Stone Crouch, pickin' side o' Betsy's brother."

While Esther took sad heed of this, Ambray was listening unconsciously to the talk of the husbands in the same group.

" So old Moon's baught that farm o' Ray's. Know wut she's gev fo' it ? "

" Noo—nat more'ns worth, *I lay.*"

" Don't think much o' the land up that end myself. Be she go'n to plough that theer holler, or fence it aarf ? "

"I caan't tell you. Ma'r S'one, be your missis go'n to fence aarf that holler up at thet field, or to plough it?"

"She hevn't quite made up her mind yet, missis hevn't—not 'bout that holler."

"She art to plough it, Ma'r S'one."

"It'ud be good fur her to plough it, sir; I 'grees to that; it's the best corn as grows in th' holler—so 'tis, sure."

"Nonsense, Ma'r S'one; you persuade her to fence it aarf."

"Or it 'ud be very handy, fenced aarf; so 'twould, sir, sure."

"I was told corn never didn't, nor never wouldn't grow, not in theer holler."

"Who telled you that?"

"Why, I wir pickin' side o' Tom laarst week, and he said your faather-in-la' said so."

"Waugh! My faather-in-la'! Old idjut! Lot *he* knows, 'cept to set the wemmen jawin' at ye. 'Cause he's a gaardener, and potters 'bout his bit o' ground arl day, there's

my wife at me everlastin' 'bout our bit; it's 'faather has paarsley arl the year round,' or 'faather' this, or 'faather' that. Ugh! *he* said so, did he? Then arl the more fur that I say, Moon's a fool if she don't plough that holler."

Doubtless, if the hearing had been reversed—if Esther had listened to the gruff guttural tones, and Ambray to the shrill ones—both would have found the logic they heard defective. As it was, it of course appeared perfectly natural.

But what far-away, unreal things these that the pickers talked of seemed to both! They sat outside the garden and all its worldly interests, like two children who in the great game of life had been quarrelled with and ordered to stop playing. Lonely, and sad, and inexpressibly weary, they waited to be taken by the hand from the road whose dust *was* dust to them, never again to be made into playthings and imaginary viands;

the mud-pies which had cost so much labour in making were irrevocably mud again ; they had dropped them from their hands, and now watched their companions still making them with dull and dreamy interest, half envious, half pitying.

The sweet-voiced water in the ravine beside them, though incomprehensible in what it uttered, as the talk of grown people to infants, seemed to have a meaning, a comfort, a reliableness deeper than the human voices on the other side of them.

So had that of the little air-sailor, the skylark, letting itself up and down in its hammock of song : so had the wind, creeping through the woods like music through a ball-room, and setting the autumnal brocades of gold, and green, and brown, all richly rustling.

Nature's face was sweet as her voice at that hour : the aged eyes looked up into the golden clearness, and closed in pain. Her smile fell upon them, but was not for them.

It was as if it had cast them off before death was ready to take them. They seemed waiting in some intermediate stage in which the miseries of both had access to their souls.

Ambray beheld in the lovely scene before them the house where he was born, whose doors and stairs the hopes and dreams of his wakefulness and his slumber had never ceased to haunt. These had not been selfish dreams —they had sprung from all the better part of his nature, and he knew this, and mused over their destruction, and upon the God whom he charged with destroying them, with a doubt and sarcasm of spirit that appalled himself even while he could not put it from him. If his life and losses were part of a divine plan, what a cruel plan it was that these things should be necessary! How could it benefit God for Him first to fill those windows with the sweet vision of George's children, and then to wash it out with George's blood, so that now those win-

dows, glittering in the sun, had as tragic a look to him as beloved eyes whose joy had suddenly been turned into horror ?

He withdrew his gaze from them shudderingly, and looked down upon the running water.

He heard the voice of her who had usurped his place in his father's house and lands speaking in vulgar dictatorial tones to the hop-pickers in that very garden where she, a shoeless, ragged tramp, had pleased his brother's easily attracted eye. Was *this*, too, part of the divine plan men talked of, for grey hairs to be thus abased to the earth while still the earth refused to cover them ?

Mrs. Moon approached, her silk dress rustling harshly against the hop-poles.

Ambray set up his shoulders and lowered his head.

" Well, John Ambray, how are *you* getting on ? M'ar S'one tells me you're doing wonderful. How are you, Esther ? you don't

look over well ; but la ! we caan't expect to be young always—can we ? I'm thenkful for arl of us as we've had a fine finish-up day. I shall pay up o' Friday. Good evening, I must goo and find M'ar S'one."

She went rustling away, leaving Ambray's head lower than ever on his shoulders, and his lips parted in a bitter smile as he looked into the water.

Most of the pickers were rising and resuming their tasks. A little group, nearest the miller and his wife, began a wild, rhapsodical Methodist hymn. An old woman cried out to Esther through the poles—

"Come, Esther, you arlwis used to beat us arl. Sing a bit, woman, it'll do ye good."

Esther, who had been looking wistfully towards the singers, at this turned her sorrowful old face proudly away.

Her husband, still bending over the rivulet, had heard the invitation, and interpreted the bitterness of her silence. He held his hand out to her, without looking up, and as

she took it, closed his shaking fingers over hers, saying, or almost groaning—

“By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept.”

At this the cup, so full already, overflowed. Esther dashed her apron up to her eyes, and for the next few minutes Ambray's bony fingers covered all his face.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HAUNTED MILL.

“ It is but the ground-swell of a teeming instinct :
Let it but lift itself to air and sunshine
And it will find a mirror in the waters
It now makes boil above it. Check him not.”

COLERIDGE.

THE whole of Mrs. Moon’s hops were safely picked before sunset, and Ambray and Esther went home while the light was still golden and warm along the road.

At those who passed them by, guessing what their earnings would come to, according to Ma’r S’one’s measuring, and talking of the ways in which they should be spent, the haggard old eyes looked as they might have done at creatures of another world.

To the aged poor of Southdownshire these last days of hop-picking are mostly sad enough in the retrospection that they compel. The young voices around them declaring they will not be content without the greatest prize that a hop-picker can win, reminds them how they also made the same boast, how year by year both hope and realization have dwindled, till at last they are glad to earn a warm garment to cover them, a little tobacco or snuff to deaden the sharp reality of the long winter hours, a penny or two to win the services of grandchildren strong and careless, or the smile of great-grandchildren, helpless and as yet innocent of worldly hopes as themselves.

The memory of their own youth and its hopes stole over Ambray and Esther with the faint narcotic odours of the drying hops from the oast-houses, and made their feeble steps and breathing more feeble still, as, leaning on each other, they toiled up towards the High Mills.

The white lane was hot and wearisome at this hour, and the south wind did nothing but blow the dust, which flew into the eyes of the old miller and his wife, and encircled their stooping forms so as to cause Ambray to smile bitterly, and mutter, as Esther murmured at it on his account,

“ Why should it stand on ceremony with what will so soon belong to it ? It comes for *us*, as we won’t go to *it*. ”

This dust and the heat, the quick cloud of gnats before their eyes, and the steepness of the road, made them oblivious of a sound and sight which otherwise must have much sooner attracted their attention. As it was, they had passed the spot where Michael first saw the white tip of the mill-sail flash up against the sky, before Esther happened to raise her eyes. When she did so, she started back crying,

“ Oh, my heart ! John, the mill’s going ! ”

The miller strained his eyes passionately through dust, gnats, and sun ; then caught

his wife's arm with both hands, and looked into her face.

"Esther," he said, in a quick whisper, "has she done it at last? Has she taken them from us? Has she put some ore in it, Esther?"

"No, no; nonsense," answered Mrs. Ambray, trying to keep herself from shaking; "it's those boys again, John. Of course it is."

"Rascals!" ejaculated the miller, with a strange mixture of relief and anger. "Yes, of course it must be them. I'll teach 'em—but—but, Esther, they've set it right for the wind; those rascals never got it just right like that. Oh! if she has, Esther!"

"It's the boys, John, it's the boys," said Esther reassuringly. "They'll make off as soon as they see us. Let's hurry up; don't stand here frightening yourself like this. Come."

They pressed on together, each supporting arm trying to conceal its trembling from the other.

Ambray stood still as they reached the mill-field.

He had no voice, but as he turned to Esther, shaking his head and moving his lips, she understood him to say—

“It’s not the boys. She has done it. She has put some one in.”

After this he strode on before her towards the mill, and did not stop till he stood close under it. He paused before the half-open door listening without making any movement to enter. Then he walked round, looking up at all the windows.

As he again met Esther at the door he said with the calmness of utter despair—

“If she’s let it—if she’s put any one into it, I shall burn it, Esther. I shall burn it to the ground.”

He had not finished speaking before Esther’s hand caught his and held it against her heart, and looking at her face, he saw it raised towards the mill with colour coming on its white cheeks, tears brimming

and softening the eyes, hope parting the thin lips.

“John,” said she, “as I’m a living woman I think——”

“What! what!” gasped Ambray, shaking her arm and turning his back on the mill that he might keep off a sound, a sense he was beginning faintly to perceive. “What, Esther, what?”

“Yes!” cried Esther joyfully, pushing past him, and standing by the mill-door with both hands caught back almost to her shoulders, and her head bent and inclined to one side in the eagerness with which she listened. “Yes, yes! It is! It is!” she cried, bringing her hands one over the other on her side.

“What, woman, what?”

“It’s Michael Swift’s voice and step, as sure as my old heart’s a-beating!”

The miller crept up to her, and stood between her and the open door, listening, and fixing his eyes on her face, as if looking

for it to assist by its expression his feebler senses.

Standing thus they both heard the run of unmistakable feet down one of the upper ladders, and the deep honest roll of an unmistakable voice rising and sinking with the noise of the stone and sails,—

“Heigh, Will ! and ho, Will !
Whistle for a breeze.
Run, Will, turn the mill,
Set it to the seas.”

The little bell up over the grindstone tinkled. It was answered by a shout half cheery, half grumbling, just such as Michael used to answer it with, to Ambray’s grim amusement in the old days ; then the feet went clamping up higher and higher, and when the voice was next heard it came from the tiny square window of the shooting floor.

Ambray let out his suspended breath, crept a few steps further away from the mill, then looked up at this window, pressing both hands on his throat as if to hold in his

cough, which was shaking him. Mrs. Ambray followed and stood at his side, holding up her finger, and leaning forwards to watch his face, with such a smile on her own as had not lit its wan features for many years.

The great shadow of the sails swept round at their feet, as the voice rolled out with the immemorial mill tone, to which every miller has his own words, imitating in alternate lines the peculiar “thump-thump” of the sails, and their soft prolonged rush.

“ Day breaks, the breeze wakes,
 Bless it every mouth !
Run, Will, turn the mill,
 Set it to the south.”

Mrs. Ambray in her excitement had moved her hand tremblingly in time to the song. Ambray seeing this had seized her wrist, and held it down with a grasp like iron.

Then they heard the steps and the voice lower in the mill—the noise of the door opening on the little terrace. Ambray’s breath came quicker; his pressure against

his own throat, and on Esther's hand tightened.

The well-known figure stood in the little doorway, in an attitude so familiar to the eyes watching it, that it seemed as if all must be a dream since the day it stood there last.

How many times the miller and his wife had seen it looking exactly as it did now, leaning against one side the door in an utter abandonment to rest and ease, the back of the hand laid across the forehead, pushing off the cap, the black eyes looking right away over Buckholt fields, never wincing as the tips of the sails flashed round before them, but gazing on dreamily while the same mysterious words which nobody could ever understand came rolling out, as they did now :—

“ Hi, Will ! say why, Will,
 You, when *she* comes forth,
Find, Will, the wind, Will,
 Al-ways in the north.”

Ambray, looking round at the aspect of the land, and smelling the hops in the breeze, remembered that the story of his son's death was no dream. Michael had never been here so late in the year. It was all true enough. He and Esther had picked Mrs. Moon's hops—this was the last day—they had come home—had seen the sails moving—this man was Michael Swift; Michael Swift had come back to the High Mills!

He watched him shut the little door, and listened to his feet coming lower till he heard the sound of his step half smothered by the dust on the ground-floor.

Ambray turned his eyes to the half-open door. As he did so it was pushed quite open. Michael's eyes met his.

At that moment Mrs. Ambray ran to Michael and clutched at his shoulder, looking in his face, and shaking her head in speechless emotion.

Ambray seemed surprised at this, for he

gave a sigh of horror, and retreated a few steps, while watching them intently.

Michael looked at him, scarcely heeding Mrs. Ambray's clinging hands and eloquent face, while he bore the miller's gaze.

He was very pale; his face looked smaller, his eyes larger, Ambray thought: his clothes hung upon him loosely.

"My son," said Mrs. Ambray, "do you mock us, my son? Where are you bound for, and why do you come here, setting the old mill going, and making us remember what you were to us? How have you the heart to do this, Michael Swift?"

Ambray, with his eyes still upon Michael, seemed so lost in curiosity as to what his answer would be, he forgot to keep any control over his face.

Michael, still apparently ignoring Mrs. Ambray's presence, spoke to him in the manner and voice of one making the simplest matter-of-fact statement, though his eyes were full of suffering, and his lips white.

"My time is up," he said. "You have had the law on me. I have come again. Why not? Your son bought you my services; *he* gives them to you—not I. You need them. They are yours. There is nothing to pay for them, not even forgiveness if you still choose to hold it back."

Ambray looked at him still, weighing every word.

His first thought, when he understood all Michael had said, was how to conceal his own increasing excitement. It was almost more than he could bear, the idea of having this unlooked-for change in his life—of having constantly before his eyes—in his service, in his power,—the only object of interest the world contained for him.

He looked at Michael, wishing he could speak the words necessary to decide his staying. He trembled lest in his inability to do this he might lose him.

"By all that's good in this wicked

world," sobbed Mrs. Ambray, "the Lord will repay you, Michael. He surely will. When were you out of prison? How long have you been in the mill? What have you had? Near starving, I dare say. Come—come home."

For once in her life Esther, in her delight and enthusiasm over Michael, showed a defiant disregard of Ambray, never looking at him as she tried to draw Michael homewards.

But Michael gently broke from her, and went nearer to the old man.

"What do you say, master?" he asked. "You have had the law upon me as you wished. *That* is over. I have come to go on keeping my promise to George. Do you forbid me?"

At these words the miller approached a step nearer, his white face became more excited, and he shook his head with peculiar emphasis.

Michael's heart failed him.

"You do *not* forbid me, then," he asked, "to come here and work for you again?"

"Forbid you! No, that he shall not," said Esther, reckless in her joy.

Ambray shook his head even more emphatically; then turned and signed to Esther for her arm, and began to hasten homewards.

Michael stood for a moment, rendered motionless and cold as death by the deep and terrifying mystery of Ambray's expression. Seeing, however, that Esther looked back for him affectionately and anxiously, he roused himself and followed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE OLD LIFE AGAIN.

“ What wins he then by such self-sacrifice ?
Each shining virtue seems a darkened vice.”

RICHARDS.

THE old life began again.

For a whole week Ambray was absorbed by his efforts to realize Michael's presence. When Michael was in the mill he scarcely removed his eyes from it; when Michael sat in George's old place in the chimney corner, where Mrs. Ambray always insisted on placing him, he never looked towards the miller but he encountered the long furtive gaze of that terrible eye.

When Ambray had really learnt to regard

his return as a certainty, he gave himself up to long fits of morbid reflection as to how—weak and helpless as he was—the work of punishment might be begun.

He had no desire to fire the mill when he saw Michael's light there in the night. He could sit near Michael with knives on the table between them without the slightest wish to take one up for any terrible purpose ; he could sit with his loaded gun in his hands, watching for the mill rats hours together, and let Michael pass and repass him securely a hundred times. It was not his life he had any wish to strike at. He knew that a life such as his was a complete and a good thing—a triumph—end when and how it might. What he *did* desire, with all the strength that remained to him, was to see that spirit—in whose brightness and good odour George's had shown so vile and dull before the world—defiled, brought low, maimed, annihilated.

Michael having returned to the High Mills

now—showing that his patience and devotion had triumphed over prison miseries—was in itself a new theme for hatred and wrath to Ambray, glad as he was of the return, which had come to be his first recollection at morning, his last thought at night.

A new thing, too, which he noticed in Michael since his imprisonment, moved in him at once his whole heart's interest, commendation, and intensest bitterness. This was the simple and strong manner in which Michael kept his mind and heart free from the sad influences of the past. He evidently, the miller thought, regarded his error as a thing already atoned for—forgiven by God. Life, so dark to *him* by reason of so much of its light being shut away under one little lid, was still full of promise and sunshine for Michael, whose hand had caused this shutting away. He never now saw the dark eyes turn sick and confused when they encountered his look, as they had done so

often in those days when George's fate was his own fearful secret; their look still was gentle enough, but fearless as the light. Without desisting from his hard work, Michael enjoyed life as much as he could in a place where he was still regarded as little better than a murderer. Not that the inhabitants of Lamberhurst were particularly unjust or hard-hearted, but because a village idea—like a village fever—having once become settled, is not easily removed.

When Michael had to pass groups of distrustful and disliking faces, he did so with a half amused, half pitying look in his much-worn but still glad great eyes. When little children, taking the cue from their elders, lay down, and kicked, and screamed after he had tossed them in the air, or threatened to send them up with the sails, instead of being hurt in his good heart, he laughed till the old miller would come hobbling out to glare at him.

CHAPTER XIX.

AUTUMN.

“ The black frost in the white frost’s wake
Drops apples ere they mellow,
The pale sun dies behind the brake,
The vapour rises yellow.”

LEICESTER WARREN.

It was in search of some means of smiting down this bright hopefulness, independence, and courage, that Ambray brooded through the shortening autumn days and lengthening autumn nights.

The year wore on.

The dead bind was picked from the hoppoles, and lay in little black heaps at regular distances between the pole stacks. The berries and the robins’ breasts brightened to vivid scarlet in the hedges which lay across

the country now—long streaks of warm, rich colour. In the woods, too, the red stood thick, like blood settled at the surface in aged cheeks. The silver hoar-frost came, only visible a moment or two at morning, then snatched away like a forgotten garment of the night. The white hoar-frosts came, lingering hours later, striving with the sun, till nearly noon, for possession of each rustling leaf and tender blade of grass.

These changes were watched by the old miller with a bitterness indescribable. Would the winter come, he asked himself, and chain him to his bed—as it usually did—while this fearful thirst in his soul was still unsatisfied? If this went on much longer, *would* the mill be safe from fire, the knife lie harmless on the table, or the gun in his hands?

But the day did come at last when the coveted power was given him.

Michael, through a kindly act in a

corner of the village where fever was raging, fell ill himself, and lay for five weeks in the old black mill which Ma'r S'one, who was his only nurse, had made habitable for him.

When he came out and resumed his work, he was much changed : his cheerfulness was gone, and he was quick to take offence, and peevish as a child.

Ambray now quietly exulted. Michael fell completely into his power. No swine-herd was ever treated with more contumely. Every little duty that fell to his hand was embittered by puerile opposition and abuse ; every step he took, every word he uttered, was laid wait for by the same furtive, sleepless tyranny.

The healthful mind was brought so low, it retained now but one idea, which only became the more firmly rooted as the work of ruin went on. This idea was that duty compelled him to stay where he was ; then as he grew weaker, it was no longer only duty, but fate also. He felt he had it not in his power to go.

He was now reduced to such weakness of body and mind, that when he saw Ambray thrust his letters from home unopened into the fire, he could only stare through his swimming eyes and gnaw his lip in helpless sickness of soul. The miller prevented him also in all his feeble efforts at writing to his family, and delighted in the idea of their looking vainly for his letters as Michael had so long allowed him to look vainly for George's.

Mrs. Ambray did all she could to comfort Michael in these innumerable mortifications and sufferings, but the state of him by whom they were rendered filled her with such terror and anguish, that most of her time was occupied in watching and serving him, and in fruitless endeavours to induce his spirit to let go its fierce grip of this harmless and helpless creature.

It seemed as if nothing save death *could* ever loosen it.

CHAPTER XX.

WINTER.

“Tyrant, I well deserve thy galling chain ;
To live thy slave, and still to serve in vain.”

HOMER.

MICHAEL’s sufferings deepened with the winter. Ambray kept all his clothes from him but one thin summer mill-suit, in which he went about shivering so that his teeth chattered, and he became an object of pity and commiseration to all the village. The boys only, with that innate cruelty which makes human nature so terrifying a mystery, found untiring amusement in adding to his torture; and Michael had come to such a pass as to weep like a child when they placed things in his way by which he

received painful falls, or when they injured the machinery of the mill, or threw stones at the windows.

Ambray seemed to have received a new lease of life from this excitement. It kept him from his usual winter prostration. He had now no other thought than going on with this work of retribution as long as he might. He foresaw that it must be brought to an end some day. Already people were interfering. Two or three clergymen whom Ambray had known and respected in his better days, General Milwood, who had fought with his father at Waterloo, and even Mrs. Moon herself, "for the credit of the family," had been up to the High Mills to remonstrate with the feeble but bitter tyrant there.

At last Nora came. She had been abroad with Miss Milwood, and had but lately come back and heard of Michael's return, his illness, and Ambray's treatment of him.

It was on a cold afternoon that she came,

when the sails went harshly round in the east wind, and Michael stood leaning at the mill-door with closed eyes, and breathing on his icy fingers.

Ambray sat at home, cowering over the fire, and put up his shoulders and let his chin fall as he heard her horse's feet coming.

In another moment she stood before him, declaring her pity for Michael, and calling upon her uncle to put an end to these shameful stories, that met her wherever she went.

As she ceased speaking, Ambray looked up at her, and his face softened. Bitterly as he spoke of her in her absence, he could never see her without a certain tenderness, and the sense of a different and gentler grief, that fell upon his own hard sorrow like soft rain on frozen ground. He never looked at her but his regret that George should have lost her came upon him as a fresh thing. It did so now, and the thin, white old face smiled at her and wept, forgetting her appeal.

"He has not even heard," she sighed, looking away impatiently.

"Yes, Nora," said the miller, "I hear you; and I *see* you—fresh roses, bright eyes, gay, cold heart!"

"Gay!" echoed Nora, taking off her gloves and warming her hands at the fire: "What I have to bear from Aunt Jane, and what I have to bear from you, keeps my heart very gay, certainly! But if you hear me, uncle, will you think of what I have said? Will you send this man away, if you cannot overcome your feelings against him? He will not go, they tell me, unless you *do* send him. *Will* you do so, and stop *this* trouble and disgrace—this wickedness?"

"My child," answered Ambray, taking her hands as she held them to the fire, and looking down at them tenderly—"do *you* dare to judge *me*? *Let the faithful judge the faithful.* Go—the world has many lovers for Nora—but—no son for *me*! Remember this, Nora, and do not judge me."

" This man would be a son to you if you would let him," said Nora. " Why, what a miracle of patience he is, if what I've heard is true ! It seems to me he is either an idiot or—he is grand ! "

" Go," muttered the miller, dropping her hands, and shrinking down again, as if he had received a blow. " Leave me, Nora ; you do no good—you do harm—leave me alone."

" I will!" answered Nora, indignantly ; " and I will persuade Michael Swift to leave you. I will go to the mill myself, and try to show him his folly in being faithful to *you*. *Let the faithful serve the faithful.*"

She went out, and the miller hearing the door close after her, roused himself and looked round.

When he had made sure she was gone, he muttered, stooping low and gazing into the fire—

" He is either an idiot or—he is grand."

He drew back from the fire suddenly, saying with quiet decision—

"He is not an idiot."

He stood up—holding one trembling hand clenched tightly in the other—

"Is he—then grand?"

At this moment, as Esther came in, he met her, and seizing her arms cried—

"What am I doing, Esther? what am I doing? Making a young Job of him? A martyr! To draw *her* eyes upon him! Is *this* my revenge? He's taken the boy's life—his good name—his mother's love"—he cried, shaking her savagely—"and now—now could it be possible! No, I am mad to think it—mad! Yet, Esther! You should—oh! you should have seen her eyes when she flashed 'em upon me and said, '*or—he is grand!*' She has gone to the mill to speak to him. I will follow her—give me my hat—I will follow her."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE GALLEY SLAVE.

“To list’ning senses strung
 To wild desire
Worse is the silent tongue
 Than words of fire.”

KEROK.

NORA, on her way homeward, rode round by the mill, and stopped at the door. It was partly open, and she rode close up to it, and knocked with her whip, and called Michael by name.

Almost directly the door was opened wide; but the ground-floor of the mill being somewhat dark, Nora did not recognize the person who had opened it.

“Is Michael Swift here?” she asked, leaning a little forward.

The person appeared deaf, for he did not answer her.

"Michael Swift," repeated Nora, in a louder voice—"is he here?"

"I knew a *man* by that name once," answered a voice that sent a chill through her blood. "Now, *I* bear it."

He stood a little more in the light—she saw him plainly. All the pathos of the wasted strength, the patient misery, the baffled but still heroic strength of purpose, came over her at once out of those great hollow eyes, and she had to turn her face hastily away.

When she spoke, all her decision and vehemence were gone. She was surprised at the timidity and trembling of her voice.

"Why do you stay here?" she said.

"To grind it out."

"But, Michael, it is ground out."

"I thank God that I hear you say it."

"Be content, then, and go."

"I cannot do that; I must wait till I hear *him* say it too."

" You will never do that. He would never say it, never think it, unless his whole nature changed, and he is too old to change."

" Yes," answered Michael, in a low voice, full of patient despair, " I think so, too. He is too old to change."

" Then why wait here ? "

" I must wait—I must serve him while he lives—or while *I* live."

Nora was silent. She could not think what possessed her that she had suddenly lost all power to oppose him. The old mill seemed to have assumed the dignity of a castle ; the wasted, half-imbecile wretch she had heard so much of was causing her to hold down her head meekly before the doorway where he stood.

" Then you will stay ? " she said at last, almost humbly.

" Yes."

" Can I not assist you in any way ?—you will take no money. Is there nothing by which we may make your life less hard ? "

"Thank you—God bless you—no; nothing more."

"More! why, I have given you *nothing*, done nothing for you."

"May I tell you about a picture George had at our house?"

"What about it?"

"It was the picture of a ship."

"Yes," said Nora, hearing that his voice trembled.

"Yes; it was the ship of some great man, I cannot tell you who; but he had won some great victory, and those that he had taken captives were being lashed as they were in the galley, with their muscles strained ready to snap, and their eyes starting, and hands bleeding, while up above on the deck the conqueror feasted among ladies crowned with flowers. There was one lady, with her face so turned that her eyes fell on the face of one of the straining galley-slaves; but she did not know where she looked; but *he* did, and you could see he half for-

got his slavery, his toil and pain under her look."

"Well?"

"This is all the picture—but—but I wished to tell you of it that I might ask you to think how, if the galley-slave forgot his pain under *this* look quite cold and heedless, how he would have felt if he had seen the eyes run over with such—such pity, such sweetness, kindness, gentle pain, and—what! Tears too? Oh! go back then, *my* lady, go back to your feasting, and music, and merry-making, let the muscles crack, the blood pour down, the galley-slave is happy. He can work until he drops under the lash!"

Nora could not keep her eyes from filling and running over in Michael's sight, time after time, as she sat looking on the ground between them.

It seemed to her against all humanity to turn away and leave him to his sorrow and folly, yet she knew not how to blame or comfort him.

It occurred to her at last that she should, if possible, use her knowledge of his love for her to his advantage.

"Michael," she said, with generous impetuosity, "tell me you will take what I wish to say to you as more than mere desire to save that poor old man from further wickedness."

"Oh yes," answered Michael, "I know your goodness. You pity me for myself. You can see no creature suffer without feeling pain yourself."

"I do not mean in that way, Michael. Of course we none of us like to see suffering in others ; but, Michael, what I want to say to you is——"

Michael's mournful eyes drooped in lowly exultation and delight at the sight of the sweet face blushing and drooping before them. He thought he understood—before she explained—what she was meaning to say—that at least she had, for his long devotion to her people, more than common pity.

"We sometimes," continued Nora, letting her eyes meet his with gentle strength as they again looked up, "have to enter upon a painful duty with a sort of blind determination—not allowing ourselves to pause and think if it is well, when we have once resolved upon going through with it. And sometimes, after what we first wished to do is really done, we go on still, scarcely realizing it is done, like soldiers fighting without knowing the battle is really over and decided. Now, Michael," she went on, holding out her hand, while her face and her form, bending towards him, became full of the expression of one conscious of the power which being so loved gave her over her listener. "Now, Michael—good, noble, grand as *your* battle has been—you are fighting now in the dark. Oh, poor fellow! Your hand is turned against yourself very cruelly. You must let one who sees—as you cannot see—fairly—you must let me, Michael, persuade you to

leave this bitter strife, and to seek those blessings which, I believe from my heart, God has yet in store for you."

He stood where he had touched her hand, lost in the dreamy strange delight of the knowledge that he had really done so for the first time in his life.

It was, too, a joy beyond all joys he had known before, to see her thus accept his lowly love, even as a sceptre to rule him with for a few moments.

He was so happy that for the time he could not think of how he should reply to her words, but could only stand folding his joy to his soul, as a wayward child which he knew would not stay with him long.

"Michael!" cried Nora, with sudden tremulousness of voice, lip, and eye, "if you really care for me at all, or ever have cared for me, prove it to me by promising to give up this dreadful life. Go home to those who must surely love you very dearly, and be a comfort to them—do, Michael—good,

dear Michael, do ; and happiness must come to you again, I'm sure it will."

"Never!" answered Michael, almost bitterly. "Ah, you have changed all that."

"*I*, Michael? What can you mean?"

"Yes—they were all in all to me once. Home was the only little chink in all the world that let God's light in on the world, and it was enough to make all the world's darkness bright to me too. *Now*, what are they? What is home? That is the only grudge I have against you. You have altered everything so—taken all my old pleasures from me, and yet seem to have given me nothing; and yet, if I could set things as they were before, do you think that I would do it? No, never! God knows why—but I wouldn't. I'll have nothing at the price of feeling I had never seen or known or loved you, Nora."

Her name came from his lips for the first time with a passionate impatience that

showed how long and fondly it had lived there in silence.

It was a fresh and an overwhelming revelation to Nora of what his love for her was.

She caught her breath as he said it, and gave a slight start—a start, Michael thought, of anger or surprise. But Nora knew that the emotion she felt was from her having long wondered how her name would sound on Michael's lips. Her ears drank in the sound with a strange pleasure.

After this feeling there came to her one of chilly remembrance of what would be said of her disloyalty to poor George, if her lingering at the mill should be observed.

She felt almost mean in Michael's eyes as she gave way to this idea, and as she said to him—

“I must wish you good-bye; it is getting late, and I have to go back to Stone Crouch to-night.”

Michael drew back and leant against the doorway, pushing off his cap, and showing

in that simple salutation, and in his farewell gaze, deep gratitude for her visit and deep sorrow at her departure.

She went away without having had courage to again hold out her hand to him. The thought of this brought tears of keen self-reproach to her eyes as she let her pony pick his way down among the uneven stones of White Lane. She felt a strong wish, which seemed to her very childish, that he might guess she had refrained from offering him her hand at parting, from simple shyness and timidity. She hoped, quite passionately, he would not think it was through the thought of the stain the world saw on it.

All the way home she recalled the words she had said to him, and thought of words she wished she had spoken instead of these. She thought of many things she might have said to comfort him, things which even Ambray himself need not have been vexed at her saying.

Michael guessed nothing of all this that was passing in her heart as she rode away.

He thought he felt sufficient gratitude for her coming; yet her departure left in him a bitterness he could not understand.

The truth was he had felt, quite unconsciously, that while she was there all kinds of indefinable hopes and joys had crept into his dark world of possibility. Now she was gone, carrying all brightness with her; and he stood like a beggar who has been talking to a rich man, and left still penniless.

When Michael was alone, he was poor enough as to his hopes of any place in Nora's heart. But when he was with her, and the glorious summer mornings when he had met her in his early work came to his memory, and the evenings when she had no eyes but his to turn to for full and perfect sympathy with her joy in the world's beauty,—when these things came to him, Michael sometimes dared to think he was nearer to her than she owned. The delicious thought

that, at any moment, a look or word might make this wild hope a certainty had been with him even through this sad meeting.

And now Nora was gone, leaving no such word or look, and once more all was cold and dark.

Might she not have spoken? He put the question to himself, at first passionately, then with a despair that was its own answer.

He little knew that almost the same words were on Nora's lips as she rode home—

“I might have spoken. I might have said something.”

And she put her hand to her heart with the remorse of a miser, the weight of whose treasure troubles him, and makes him repent his parsimony.

CHAPTER XXII.

“CAST DOWN, BUT NOT DESTROYED.”

“In my fond mem’ry, while I roam
Where sights and sounds all tire,
How sweetly shine the lights of home
And sings the village choir !”

MICHAEL stood long at the mill-door, letting the bitter east wind turn the drops on his cheeks to dry brine, and make his blue lips quiver.

The sunset left a straight red glare like a flaming brand, that looked fierce enough to set the dark cold earth and the gray cold heavens on fire. The wind dragged at the worried winter grass, and made the hollies in the woods rattle, and gave the surface of the brook a look of ribbed steel.

Michael, who had always, in his sorest

trials, been used to look with unconscious wistfulness in the face of nature, till he thought he found there some sign, however faint, of divine mercy or tenderness, gazed round now with increasing despair.

It was a moment when nature took the heart by surprise, by its cold and awful look, as completely and overwhelmingly as it sometimes takes it by surprise by the glory and intensity of its beauty.

Michael, leaning his shoulder against the edge of the doorway, felt the iron chill of the wintry day striking deep into him. His thin summer clothes, starved body, and starved heart had no power to resist it, and it smote him to the very soul.

He threw himself down, and lay across the threshold with his arms under his face.

He tried to shut out from his perception all that scene, at this moment so unlovely, and cruel, and harsh, and to bring to his thoughts those early days which had been all peace and brightness for him.

This plan, even while he tried it so patiently, appeared to him simple and foolish as setting a child to pacify a raging lion. The bitter *now* had surely power to drive all sweetness from the happy *then*.

But as he lay there, and as the winter darkness came thickly on, he grew to be able to fancy he saw the lights appearing in familiar windows of the dear old green at Thames Dutton ; and refusing to regard the changes time had brought to those honest hearts, he comforted himself in the warmth that once glowed there. He forgot how subtle and entangled his path towards the home he then looked to had become ; he lived again the time when right and wrong were as clearly definable to him as the voices of the choir in the old church, and the brawling in the new alehouse. Now that he felt he was clinging to duty as martyrs to their faith, the one whom he thought nearest the angels told him he was wrong, and called his patience folly.

All this he forgot as the tender light and warmth of those dear days crept back to him, drawn by the magnet of his great yearning.

Michael was one of the few gifted with the power of keeping all that is good and true in the past, good and true in the memory to the end. If things changed, he did not cry out that he had been deceived; he suffered over the change, but remembered the good that had been as a certainty. Thus there were sunny glades for his retrospective eye to gladden itself with—glades that never lost their sunlight, whatever blackness the shadows of the storm-clouds made elsewhere.

So, even at that moment, with his lips against the cold ground, and while the winter night, like a Giant Despair, put a mighty chain of black clouds round about the world, and roared over it with hoarse voice and icy breath, even then Michael was able to draw into his heart some comfort.

Old Guarder sat shivering close to his shoulder, casting wistful glances into his warm kennel ; but, being too polite to retire to rest before his master, he bore his discomfort as well as he could, repressing his yawns, and thumping his tail on the ground, but looking, nevertheless, a perfect picture of misery.

Hearing at last Ma'r S'one's steps approaching, he thumped with such energy and delight as to rouse Michael.

As he lifted his face, and saw Guarder so close to him, he stretched his hand out in much gratitude for such attention. Then, looking up and seeing the darkening night, and his own path of darkness and misery before him, he could not forbear a cry, not of sorrow or despair, but of simple full-hearted gratitude for the few moments' respite his soul had known—

“ Even when Thou art not with me or before me, I may look back and find Thee —sure and mighty.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

PAST LAW.

“ Many of what we call possessions are punishments.”
HELPs.

“ ‘CLINE our ’erts to keep this la’ ! ” said Ma’r S’one, not understanding in the least degree what Michael meant, but merely endorsing in his usual way what seemed to him a religious sentiment. “ Why, Ma’rs Michael,” he added, “ ye’ll be froze to death.”

“ What do *you* do up here so late, Mr. Ma’r S’one ? ” asked Michael, rising wearily ; while Guarder, apparently relieved of all anxiety concerning him now that a third person had arrived, crept to his kennel, and curled himself up for the night.

"I comed up, Ma'rs Michael," answered the old man, looking on the ground and shaking his head," to ask you to be so good as break it to Mrs. Armbray as the missis is arful bad to-night. They've sent Orry after Miss Nara for to fetch her back, and the doctor he says he caan't say, he caan't, how the night may goo wi' her. He's tauld her—poor soul—as she may see the mornin' ar she may not, accordin' to the pleasures o' Providence, Ma'rs Michael, which we dedn't ought fur to question, whether they be to our liking ar not; so ' 'Cline our 'erts to keep this la' !'"

Michael shut up the mill, and went home as quickly as he could while accommodating his steps to Ma'r S'one's.

On their way Ma'r S'one told him more about the sudden illness of his mistress, which proved to be an attack of apoplexy.

In spite of Ma'r S'one's avowed submission to Providence, he could not forbear gently hinting to Michael his wonderment

that so rich and important a person should be called instead of such as Ma'r S'one himself, whom no one would miss.

Michael inquired how Mrs. Moon had borne the doctor's news, and what state of mind she was in.

"I'm bound to say, Ma'rs Michael," answered Ma'r S'one very mournfully, "as she took it very haard at first. The doctor he owes her a long sight o' rent—he do—an' first thing he told missis when she come to 'self, she says to him 'Doctor,' she says, 'understand once fur arl as it's arl to your interest to get me through wi' this, fur I'm goin'," she says, 'to drar up a arder as your rent is to be let alone while I live, but that my siliciter takes preceedin's the very hour I die; so don't let *me* have no nonsense,' she says. 'You dedn't think as I dedn't know what I wur about,' she says, 'leaving your rent behind the others.' She carled out fur paper and ink fur to write, but when we bracht it to her she cried out

sharp, ‘Take it away; take it arl away, and bring Miss Nara to me.’”

When Michael entered the now dreary little garden of Ambray’s cottage, Esther Ambray was standing at the door watching for him.

She had by this time fallen into a habit of speaking sharply to Michael from the sympathy she had with her husband’s abhorrence of him, which came oftener to the surface than her own half frightened affection for him dared to do.

She asked him sharply what made him so late, and if he wished to add to the talk there was about his ill-usage by keeping at the mill till such an hour.

Michael beckoned her silently to come a few steps into the garden, that he might give her Ma’r S’one’s news without the miller hearing.

Poor Esther put up her apron and began to cry. She was in that kind of dull misery that finds some relief in almost any prospect

of change. It flashed into her mind instantly that some great change *might* come when Nora should be rich ; but the very idea of comfort was too much for her, so she began to cry, thinking honestly that she did so out of pity for her husband's sister-in-law, in her sad condition.

" Poor Jane ! " she said. " Poor soul ! I forgive her everything. God forbid we should all be looked on as responsible for all we do. I wish I could do anything. I wonder if I could, Michael. But I forgot."

She sighed, and Michael knew what she meant she had forgotten for the moment. This was that she now could never feel it safe to leave Ambray and Michael alone together.

Michael consoled her with the reminder that Mrs. Moon's servant was a good-hearted, sensible girl, and that her mother lived in a cottage in the yard, so that with these two and Nora, every necessary attention could be given her.

"Don't breathe a word to *him* about it," enjoined Mrs. Ambray, signing towards the open door. "There's no knowing how he might take it, or what might come to him at any great change. God help us!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A BROKEN BOW.

"He laughs at hope, and he laughs at fear ;
At memory's dead leaves, crisp and sere.
He laughs at the future, cold and dim—
Nor earth nor heaven is dear to him."

WINTER.

WHEN Michael woke the next morning, he was conscious of a sort of solemn lull over everything. The very air, the ticking of the clock, seemed to him to be full of the presence of the terrible visitor whose feet had lingered at the gates of Buckholt, even if they had not entered, and departed—not alone.

Neither of the old people were up as he left to go to the mill.

The morning was all a dreary sullen grey,

and colder than the night before had been. A single star shone over the house of the stricken woman, and Michael, who was more good-hearted than sentimental, instead of coupling it poetically with Nora's presence there, trusted it might be a sign of hope for the poor sufferer, either in this life or the next.

Mrs. Ambray had of late put his breakfast ready for him at night, that he might take it and be out of the house before the miller saw him.

His news had in this instance caused her to forget it, and he had come to work fasting.

He thought it probable she might become aware of her omission, and bring some food up to him, as she had a great dread of his meeting the miller in the early part of the morning, that being his worst time.

As hour after hour passed, and still she did not come, Michael, who had not, since his fever, much strength to carry him through a long fast, was obliged to leave

his work, and sit on the steps of the ground-floor.

He had scarcely been resting five minutes before the bell began to toll.

He got up and stood holding the long shaft near him, staring out at the open door, till the water came to his eyes. This he dashed away, and tried to smile upon the chasm which, since the first solemn knell, he had seen widening more hopelessly than ever between himself and Nora. Yet the old fields and familiar roofs had assumed a new charm for Michael's eyes from that first instant when he felt they had become her own.

He looked round him at the little mill itself with new reverence and affection—it was hers. He, too, in reality was now partly her servant.

This thought made him fall to considering how this sudden change might affect the miller's position; and then Michael saw at once that Nora would make such provision

as must render all further service from him absurdly useless.

To be cut off from Ambray's tyranny was sweet relief; but to be banished from those who had indeed become nearer to him than his own kindred, and from the scenes that were dearer than his first home—this was quite as a prospect of death to George's faithful friend.

All that day he stayed at the mill, fasting and unheeded, and suffering little less than those who are suddenly warned to look death in the face do suffer.

All his health, his strength—the best feelings of his nature—the very power of receiving happiness would all be left behind him for ever, he felt, and he would go to be cast under the world's feet, like those husks on the mill-floor.

At about four o'clock in the afternoon the mill-door was pushed open, and Mrs. Ambray came in.

Her face was very white and much drawn.

Michael had never seen it so before, nor had he ever met such a gaze as she fixed on him.

There was something in it he could not in the least understand. It seemed searching his very soul, with a deep but half despairing wistfulness ; and this, with the sharp pain on the face, and its look of fixed purpose, filled Michael with wonder.

“ It is all over ? ” he said inquiringly.

Mrs. Ambray nodded quickly, without changing a muscle of her face.

In thus looking at Michael with an interest that lay so much beyond himself, it evidently began to dawn upon her how wan and pinched he was looking.

She drew her long fingers across her eyes with an impatient murmur at herself, then asked him sharply—

“ What ! have you had nothing to eat all day ? ”

Michael smiled, and shook his head.

“ I thought you might be at the farm,” he

said, “and wouldn’t wish me to go round home while you were away.”

“Wait here,” Mrs. Ambray commanded in the same sharp tone, and to enforce the command, she no sooner got outside the mill-door than she turned the key and took it from the lock.

The time seemed long to Michael before her return. Yet the poor woman told him afterwards she had run all the way home and back to the mill.

She brought him half a loaf of bread and some cold broth, which he swallowed gratefully.

While doing so under Mrs. Ambray’s gaze, her manner, and the expression of her white firm face, made him grow more and more certain that something was to be expected or demanded of him as soon as the silent meal should be over.

He looked up with a grateful smile as he gave her the basin, turning it upside down on the plate to show her how hungry he had been.

Her own face remained like stone as she received the things from him, but when she had set them down on the oat-bin, and turned again towards him, her sunken lips quivered slightly, and her eyes grew full of agonized questioning.

Michael rose, looking into them with a vague sort of cheery assurance.

He patted her shoulder and her clenched hands.

“Now, old mother,” he said, half alarmed, half soothingly. “What is it? What’s the matter?”

The hands unclenched, and one was laid on Michael’s arm, holding him a little off, yet not repelling him.

The aged eyes began such a scrutiny of him as he had never encountered before.

“Mother, mother! what now?” he asked more faintly.

His heart throbbed with such increasing violence under her look, he wondered what could be affecting him that he was as

yet unconscious of, except in so vague but terrifying a manner.

He scarcely recognized in this woman the quiet, careworn, patient creature, the almost abject wife he had known so long.

There seemed to look upon him from those wan eyes a spirit that filled him at once with fear, and with a sort of divine thirst to conquer fear. It looked on him, he thought, scarcely as one of this world might look, but as one inspired by perhaps only a transient, but an unworldly and a grand belief in such depths of human goodness and power as he felt perhaps no human being had ever looked for in another.

He stood the gaze, with trembling and with tears, but with head erect, and eyes looking unflinchingly into hers.

“Who calls me mother?” she said at last, in a voice so strung with feeling, it might have recovered the thrilling music of its youth.

“I do. I have earned the right by mis-

fortune and service," Michael tried to say; but he could not command his voice, and scarcely knew whether she had heard him or not.

"Michael, who *should* be living now to call me mother?"

"If I forget," answered Michael, "why do I stay here?"

Her eyes kindled still more, and her look grew more keenly searching.

Michael felt more in awe of them than he had ever done of any eyes before.

"Why you came here first of all, I can believe," said Mrs. Ambray, "it was as you said, to comfort and to work for those you had made childless—but—as for your second coming—as for your staying now, when all the world laughs at you for it—that lays between you and your Father that's in heaven, Michael Swift."

Michael put his hand to his forehead, still looking at her through the water in his eyes, and his lips half breaking into a smile.

"My life lately," he said, "hasn't been exactly one to sharpen one's wits. I don't understand, mother, what you are driving at."

"I'll put it to you plainly, Michael," she answered. "I know you are—you have been ever since you came here—in love with Nora Ambray, and I ask you how are we to know it is not on that account—only that—that you stay on here, till you're the talk of the place for submitting to more than mortal man ever submitted to before?"

Michael laughed and fell back some steps from her.

"And you think," he asked, his voice shaken by bitter laughter, "if I had not been chained to the master's grindstone by my last words to George—you think I would have loved Nora and stayed *here*? You think, with one grain of strength left, I would have stayed here—the object of her pity and contempt, while there were ways in the world to work for her. Why, mother,

this gloomy day has turned your brain !
What *are* you thinking of ? ”

“ I want you, Michael,” she said. “ Come home with me.”

She laid her hand on the latch, and Michael, gazing at her in bewilderment, saw less of that cold wondrous power of searching in her face, and more intensity of sorrow.

He followed her out at the door, and when she laid her hand on his arm, rather to draw him along than to find assistance herself, he tried to guide her steps and support her trembling form as best he could.

She did not pause till they were at the door of the home which Michael had pictured as being so soon made bright by Nora’s generosity.

Then Mrs. Ambray laid both her hands on his arm, and drew him on one side to the parlour window.

She motioned for him to look in at it cautiously.

He did so, and saw a sight he never forgot.

It was only the old miller sitting at a table by himself, laughing to himself; but it was the most terrible sight Michael had ever looked upon.

That look of meaningless cunning—that awful, empty mirth—meant, Michael knew too well, but one overwhelming calamity, that made all others seem small.

He took the hands that clutched his arms so tightly, and drew the trembling figure away.

But the sight had made his whole soul shudder at the prospect of dragging on his life with this poor sufferer, who in his sane moments had been so terrible.

Before he could control his passionate revulsion at the idea of his sufferings being intensified by this new and awful fact, the words broke from him—

“ But Nora is rich now. She will do all that can be done. I am free, I can go home.”

" You *are* free. You *can* go home," she answered in a whisper, " but let me speak to you. Come back to the mill, we must not be heard. Come back to the mill and let me speak to you."

CHAPTER XXV.

STRENGTHENED FETTERS.

“ But our best friend, though we offend him still,
From these offences drawes humilitie ;
Which makes us crouch, and kneele, and pray, untill
He doth commiserate our misery.”

DAVIES.

MICHAEL allowed himself to be led back to the mill-field, which never before had seemed to him so wearying a height.

When the miller’s wife once more closed the door, he fell against it ready to weep like a child.

Then the stiff old knees bent before him to the very floor, and the grey head, hitherto so proud to all but one, bowed nearly to his feet. The voice and its entreaty came up

to him like the rising of bitter waters about his soul, holding it from its longed-for freedom.

“ Michael, help me ! Help me to hide what you have seen to-night. Help me to take care of him. He’s worse sometimes—he is furious, but I’ve hidden it. Look at my arm—look, Michael. Ah, but I’ve hidden it all—and I’d let him kill me—I’d die a thousand times rather than let him be taken to the mad-house. I have tried to keep it from even you ; but I’m a poor, weak old woman, and it goes hard with me, Michael, when his fits are on. And then, when I’ve thought how you would lay down your life to serve him, I’ve longed to tell you—but yet scarce dared. But now I can manage him no more, he is too much for me ; and all must be found out, and he’d be taken to that place, and chained, and beat, and starved—and I should shriek my life out, or go mad too. But we’ve *one* chance. You called yourself our son. Now prove if

God has made you o' one kind with us, for all your wishing, and repentance, and good hard life, such as makes Nora talk of you as a saint above us all. You look on it as your salvation to be called our son. Oh, my son, save your father ! Bind yourself to him by a tie such as will make poor George a stranger in comparison to you, and so that the very angels shall wonder at the bond between you, and shall say, If this man is such a son to an earthly father, who was but his father by repentance, what will he be to his Father in heaven ? Michael, look upon me—George's bereaved mother ! Michael, Michael ! speak to me ! ”

Michael stooped and tried to raise her, but she kept obstinately on her knees, clasping his hands, and staring up to his face in agonized suspense, while her heart seemed heaving with all the strength of her youth.

“ No, no,” she cried ; “ leave me on my old knees till you've refused or promised me.

As George's mother, I ask you to deny me or promise me—as George's mother, I will take to my poor broken heart which of these two you shall choose to do. I will tell my boy when I meet him in the better world ; I will tell Him that gave the boy that life you took. I will tell how you choose now. Don't think me hard, Michael. I know you have worked out what most would call a great atonement. But what has it been to me? I can't judge of it, because it's brought ruin on my poor man. As yet, it had perhaps been better for us if we'd never seen you ; but if you go on *now—now* I *can* judge of it—I can see what you have felt ; I can see how your prayers for to come to be our son are heard. I can see it's all been the noblest work as ever was on your part from the day you first came to the mills."

Michael had by this time loosened his hands, so that hers clung to them without any responsive grasp.

She had not been aware of this while

speaking, but as she ceased, she became conscious of it, and snatching her hands away, clasped them shudderingly to her breast as she gazed up at him with a great fear in her eyes.

Michael stooped again, pale and silent, and laid his hands on her wrists to try to raise her.

Her arms remained rigid.

"No," she said, this time with the obstinacy of despair. "Leave me where I am, Michael, or lift me up as the mother whose prayer you do not refuse."

Michael bent over her, grasping more firmly the weak but rigid arms.

She held back, crying passionately—

"As the mother whose prayer you do not refuse!"

"As that," answered Michael in her ear, and then he raised her.

She stood between him and the long shaft, supporting herself by both.

Tender triumph came in drops to her worn

eyes, as she realized she had won this strong champion to aid her in keeping the form so loved, even in its fury, from the terrors of the mad-house.

The next feeling that showed itself on her face was one of reluctant but stern justice towards Michael.

"Even now," she said, "I dare not hold you to your promise, or take it till I have told you something; and after that you may perhaps never give it."

"Then let it rest," said Michael: "it is given."

She looked at him, apparently half inclined to take him at his word. But as she saw on Michael's face the light of the fire through which his soul had passed in fitting itself to make the promise, something better than justice prompted, or perhaps compelled, her to speak.

"No," she said; "you shall hear the truth first, Michael. Nora loves you."

Gentle as the first perfect spring day

dawns to show what all the trouble of the winter has been for, the joy of these words dawned in Michael's soul, and he was for some moments conscious of nothing in the world beside.

He knew the miller's wife too well to have a doubt as to whether she would speak such words without fullest reason. No ; the truth was given him, and received by him, as unmistakable, and palpable, and all glorious, as sunshine itself.

He stood dazzled, like one who has half the night been toiling through darkness and danger up the side of some misty mountain, and who comes suddenly in view of the sunrise in its moment of dewy glory.

Perhaps a less simple heart than Michael's would have seen at once how this joyful news must eventually clash with the promise he had just made. But the spirit in which he made it had been too full of pure sincerity, and high purpose, not to have itself given him a kind of solemn and

impressibly sad joy, such as we feel in consenting to something that strikes a sort of death through all but the best part of us.

This joy was strong in Michael when the other more living and realizable joy came ; but, instead of jealously analyzing them to see if they were likely to conflict, he allowed the two to mingle. In perfect gratitude and self-abandonment to God he cried, as he let his forehead sink on Mrs. Ambray's shoulder,—

“ Do what you will with me, mother. Strength is given me for the worst that can befall me in this world.”

She held her head back, and gazed at him, first with tears of tender wonder, then with keen looks of doubt.

“ My son, my only earthly help—oh, Michael ! dare I trust you ? ”

“ Well, mother, are you going to doubt me at the very moment you have made life sweet in the very depths of bitterness ? ”

“ But, Michael,” she went on, clasping her

thin fingers about his arm, and trying to conceal the trembling doubt in her voice and eyes, “this dear girl is so out and out honest, and so brave, and so don’t-care-for-the-world like, she may show you that she loves you, and then, then—ah! my son—if I *had* a son—he would know he could not take a charge like this, share a secret like this with me, and think of marrying. Why, Nora must know then, and she would never let us keep it quiet a day ; for our safety sake she’d get doctors at him—and then—oh, the awful place !—oh, my man, my poor man!—may the earth open and hide us both before that comes to be. Ah! it’s only his own flesh and blood can have the wish to save and hide him. Where is he that we had a right to look to in such a pass as this ? Where is the natural stay of our old age—the apple of his father’s eye—my lad, my George ? ”

Michael leant his shoulder against the shaft, quivering at each cry as if it had been a stab.

Those words as to Nora's courage had gone to his heart with an exquisite sense of conviction that for the moment almost overpowered him.

From this sweet intoxication those weak but awful cries towards the dead roused him ; from his newly opened Eden he was driven by a vision terrible as the angel with the flaming sword.

He stood a moment sick and stunned. His soul put out no remonstrance against the closing of this lovely garden he had been shown, but it claimed the right to linger and sorrow a little at the shut gates.

He turned from the trembling old woman, and walked from wall to wall of the little mill with the increasing impatience and passion of a lion who has but just woken and become aware of the smallness of his cage.

Mrs. Ambray was now so truly alarmed that all Michael's purpose was undergoing some great and utter change, that she was for some moments dumb with fright.

In her weakness she took refuge at last in calling again on the name which had so shaken Michael to hear—

“ My George ! Oh, our brave dear George ! ”

Michael stopped suddenly before her with a smile on his lips, and a turbulent but grand strength in his eyes.

The poor soul felt her shallow cunning was detected, and hung her head.

“ Come, come, mother,” said Michael, “ don’t be a hypocrite. You know as well as I do, that if you had ten sons you could not ask as much of ’em all put together as you look for from me.”

She looked up into his great half scornful, half tender eyes, she seized his hand, and panted, and trembled, and wept ; then down she fell again to her knees, not this time to Michael, but covering her face in prostrate gratitude, and crying in a voice that pierced through the little mill,—

“ Father o’ all mercy, I believe Thou’st

heard Thy servant. I believe this man will do it."

Her agitation was so great, Michael had difficulty in lifting her.

"Come, mother," he said with great gentleness, "make your heart easy. By that mercy I've trusted in, and do still trust in, to take the curse of that poor lad's blood off me, I promise. I vow to you, and to Him above us, I will make myself my master's faithful keeper in this sore strait. While I can keep it, he shall know no asylum but his home—no fetters but these arms. This, I say—I vow; so come now, old mother, kiss me and believe me, and put on a brave face."

At that moment the poor woman opened her heart. She poured upon Michael such a flood of praise and tender absolution, such promise of future joy, with an eloquence he had never met in tongue or book. It was marvellous. It took away his breath; it forced him to feel the joy of being truly

half absolved by George's parents from their sense of the wrong done them. It forced him to have some vague delicious belief in the distant joy of which it prophesied. It armed him with strength for his awful duty, which began from that moment.

As they opened the mill door, Michael started back, for Ambray was kneeling there, with bared clenched teeth, and dangerous eyes.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MICHAEL'S CHARGE.

“ And as long, O God, as she
Have a grain of love for me,
So long, no doubt, no doubt,
Shall I nurse in my dark heart,
However weary, a spark of will
Not to be trampled out.”

TENNYSON.

MRS. AMBRAY had not sought help too soon. What might have happened that night, if she had kept her secret, Michael dared not think of. He was initiated in the fearful mysteries of his new ordeal in a way that prepared him for a time of such torment as he hardly thought earth could hold.

The madness became steadily more dangerous. Mrs. Ambray had not looked

for this. She had expected the long fits of brooding, and near approaches to sanity, would continue. Instead of this, in a few days after she had confided in Michael, the miller's life was divided into three states —utter exhaustion; dangerous, cunningly-concealed recovery; and aimless frenzy.

Mrs. Ambray kept Nora away by saying the miller had ordered she should not come into his sight, as he was suffering so greatly at the thoughts of George not being able to enjoy her good fortune with her.

Nora thought this likely enough; but she thought it still more probable that Mrs. Ambray had told the miller things she had said about Michael, and that he had his suspicions and bitter anger aroused.

She judged it best to remain in solitude at Buckholt till after Mrs. Moon's funeral.

Michael saw her solitary bright window in the dark house, and blessed it as the one little star in his nights of increasing blackness and horror.

As the miller's fits of frenzy came on at no certain times, they knew not when to expect them, and often the two faithful guardians were in a peaceful and deep sleep when the fit came on.

Often they were wakened by the grating of the door-bolt, or the crackling of fire, and often by the proximity of dangerous fingers, or the sense of something held over them with dreadfully intent.

Ambray's besetting wish was to escape. He sometimes fancied that Michael's trial had gone in his favour, and that on this account he was himself thrown into prison. At other times he thought he had to go to bring George out of some trouble, and that Michael was preventing him.

Mrs. Ambray would wake and find the wind rushing into the cottage, the door wide open, the dear and awful charge flown.

Then would begin Michael's dismal search; then the race when Ambray saw him—the reckless flight, the brave pursuit,

the capture, the struggle, the return, the struggle renewed within the closed house.

The poor tyrant, subdued at last, had his injuries counted over by tender fingers, and tearful eyes ; and Michael knew that, however gentle he had been, the poor wife's heart rose against him at every fresh bruise or scratch she found. What painful tokens of the struggle Michael's own flesh bore, she seldom knew of ; but there came many a day when he scarcely knew how to drag through his work without betraying his suffering.

It would have been impossible to bear so much in that time, but for the precious secret Mrs. Ambray had imparted to him when she had made him a sharer in her own terrible one. When he thought of the watcher in that house of death, perhaps letting her love for him keep the chill of the place from entering her warm young heart, his own heart triumphed still over all its misery.

He knew that this new joy he had been given, was like a rootless thing, and must in time die utterly, or leave living only the sharpness and poison of its thorns. The old miller was strong, and while he lived, Michael felt his vow lived and bound him to this life of torment, of which Nora must never know. What then could he do but repulse her gentle advances, should she ever make them, as it did seem possible her generous and noble heart might prompt her to do ?

What could he do but repulse her, and so sting her pure and guileless nature as to leave in it nothing but bitterness and scorn for himself henceforth ?

But to this prospect Michael's tried heart had not yet dared to turn. For the present the sweetness of the knowledge of her love for him was new, and the delight that must perish soon was still delight, and balm for all his pain.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A BITTER TRIUMPH.

“ Thrill me not
With words that, in their bitter agony, suggest
A hope too ravishing.”

TALFOURD.

MICHAEL's trial came suddenly.

It was about a fortnight after the funeral and Nora's legal entrance upon her new possessions.

He had passed a night of greater mental pain than ever he had known before. Its actual events had not been nearly so terrible as those of other nights, but the poor maniac had held him on the verge of horrors and dangers, such as left him, when all was over, weak as a child, and peevish as a sick woman.

He was standing by some sacks of corn Ma'r S'one had just sent up, and was feeling too weary to drag them inside the mill, when he heard a voice speaking to Guarder that sent the blood to his sunken cheek.

The next instant Nora was coming towards him.

Michael felt he had not sufficient command over his half hysterical joy and fear to be able to meet her.

Affecting not to perceive her approach, he took one of the sacks, and dragged it in.

When he came out and laid his hands on another sack, they trembled on it helplessly, for Nora stood close by them, her eyes dilating—her face growing pale with wonder and alarm at the additional sad change she saw in him.

His whole frame shook; he fell forward, leaning his weight on the sacks, and, trying to hold his hands still in each other, he clasped them tightly, as he looked up at her with swimming greedy eyes.

Nora would not have remained so pale had she known what he looked for in her sweet face, with such daring certainty of finding it—a sign of her precious but unreachable love.

Her ignorance of this made her careless of concealing any sign.

So Michael saw all her love there, in all its angelic purity, pity, and depth.

His own soul, foolishly joyful at the sight, rushed to his eyes in light and water, and to his lips in great sunny smiles.

This made him more like the Michael of old, and Nora's spell of silence broke. Yet her manner was firmer than her voice as she said, making a movement of pushing the sack from his hands—

“Come, you foolish, noble slave, there must be an end of this.”

His thoughts went deeper than hers as he answered—

“Yes, I know there must be an end—yes. But while it lasts—ah ! while it lasts—why remind me of the end ? ”

Nora understood then that he was thinking of her visit, and his joy in her presence.

She blushed, and looked down at the miller's name on the sacks, saying in some confusion—

“ Michael, you don't understand me. I mean you *must* now give up your good and noble intention of sacrificing your life to my poor uncle. I have come now to tell you that till Aunt Esther can soften his heart towards me, she has promised to let me provide for them without his knowledge. He is so ill and so much confined to his bed he cannot find out our innocent deception.”

“ Have you spoken to your Aunt Esther about my going ? ” he asked her, with a laugh full of misery.

Nora looked troubled.

“ Yes,” she said, “ and I find her very unreasonably opposed to the idea ; but I think it only comes from a foolish pride about taking all they need from me. And yet, I tell her, I feel only a kind of steward

here for them ; and I hope in time she will lose that silly idea that it is better to take your life and strength than this money they call mine.”

“ Hear that ! ” laughed Michael, raising himself, and seizing a sack with an affectation of sudden strength and pride. “ They look on me as nearer to ‘em than you, that’s plain ; that’s just what I wish. I must go to work with a vengeance.”

Nora watched him drag all the sacks inside the mill.

In placing the last one, his wrist, which had been severely strained in the night, gave him such pain that he nearly fainted.

Not knowing the cause, this was so alarming to Nora that she hastened to where he had sunk huddled on the floor, and kneeling before him, sobbed out—

“ Michael, my poor Michael ! you are killing yourself. Oh, what possesses you ? ”

Her voice of undisguised, childish pity, her soft touch on his uninjured hand, made

him think of his vow, and pray mutely for strength.

Yet he could not keep his eyes from drinking in her sweet pity and generous love, and this kept what he prayed for far from him.

He was conscious of a subtle and increasing rebellion against himself rising within him.

At that moment there was a slight change in the light, that caused him to look up to the little window looking north.

At the sight he saw there all his soul returned to the shadow of his vow.

Poor Esther had seen Nora going towards the mill, had followed her, and stood there listening. When Michael looked up to the little window, her white old face was watching him with a half hopeless entreaty that conquered him, or rather gave him the strength to conquer himself.

“Thanks,” he said, trying to look at Nora’s face calmly, “I am better. Since

that fever I have often been like this ; but it's nothing."

There was that in his voice which seemed to drive back her generous pity and solicitude.

She rose, scarcely offended, but gently perplexed.

Michael drew himself up, and stood leaning on the sacks, with lips white as death could have made them.

Nora hesitated. The strife between her natural timidity, and her strong desire to draw him from that life of toil and ruin, was very great.

Her heart beat so quickly as to make it impossible for her to speak otherwise than agitatedly ; and her cheeks, which were pale when she entered the mill, were now a deeper colour than ever he had seen them.

Mrs. Ambray saw the girl looked lovelier than she had done before in her brightest, merriest days.

The old heart throbbed almost as wildly as the young ones.

"Tell me one thing, Michael," said Nora, with quivering lips and eyelids proudly lowered. "You cared for me so very much, you said, last summer; is—is that all over now?"

A hard quick breath, almost like a laugh, burst from him, but he could not answer her in words. Yet it had power to make Nora know the spirit of his answer better than any words.

A great joy glorified her face. Her sense of her possessions, and Michael's rags and wretchedness, made her generous love brave in asserting itself.

Yet nothing, he thought, could be gentler than her words, or the voice in which they came to him—the words sweet as the first scents that hint at spring, the voice soft as the south wind that wafts them.

"Michael," she said, growing pale at her

own courage, as lilies shew whiter in opening their pure hearts, "I feel that your noble life lately has so exalted you above me that I am quite unworthy of setting my opinion against yours. Yet I *must* ask you once more to forgive me for saying how much I think you err in still feeding, by the sight of your great faithfulness, my uncle's hatred. I should not say this again, alone. I have another reason now, besides your own welfare, for asking you to cease from this cruel self-destruction. Michael, I loved George Ambray dearly, not for what he was, but for what I thought he was. When you first came, I loved him better. You made me think what I would like him to be, and what I would hope he might become. Then, afterwards, I found that he was really nothing of all that. I saw that you were really all I thought he was, and more, and—and I told you—I dearly loved what I thought he was."

She ceased with tears, and one proud sob. He left her standing there in her angelic courage and girlish shame, never moving towards her as he spoke, after what was, to her, a cruel silence.

"There are men," he said, "who know that those dearest to them will *never* understand their best actions, let 'em explain them to the fullest. When men can suffer this and live, I don't think *I* should suffer quite as I do now, because I am, and must be, misjudged—only *until* I *may* explain. For I know that my own eye does not see clearer than what I do is for the best, than yours shall some day see in this world, or in another. I know this—and I know it ought not to be the bitterness it is to me to say—let those dear words be as never spoken, unless they may be left in my heart as seeds that must stay a winter or more without sign that they are there. *Then* they indeed shall be precious to me, and full of saving power. But *now*—oh, Nora,

Nora ! leave me, or the trouble of my life is lost!"

"Let those words be indeed unspoken," said Nora in a low voice ; and she turned towards the door.

He went past her, almost reeling from foot to foot, and clutching the open door with pale, stiffening hands.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

REVEALED BY FIRE.

“ But he shall fade into a feebler age :
Feebler, yet subtler. He shall weave his snares,
And spring them on thy careless steps, and clap
His withered hands.”

BRYANT.

WHEN Nora had gone out, Mrs. Ambray went into the mill, looking like some guilty creature.

She found Michael sitting on the ground, gazing before him with eyes that took no heed of her.

She knelt down and pressed his head to her heart, and kissed his hair, calling him her son, and blessing him ; but he moaned out to her for solitude, and so she left him.

All the while she had been with him, Michael had cried mutely in his soul—

“What wilt Thou with me, Lord, if *this* expiation be not supreme and final?”

When he rose and set about his work, the pale sun was shining on the damp afternoon, and the shadow of the sails fell darkly, like an elongated cross, on the mill-yard.

When Michael found himself standing on this shade, he looked down upon it, folded his arms, and smiled. For the thought came to him that surely his long travelling on the hill of pain had brought his soul indeed beneath the shadow of the cross, and that the end must needs be near at hand.

While he stood there Mrs. Ambray came hurrying back to him, with bad news of the patient.

The sleeping draught they had given him had taken an unfavourable effect upon

him, and she feared the approach of one of his worst fits, now that he had wakened from his long sleep.

Michael went home and watched with her, but it seemed that her fears were groundless. Beyond some signs of unusual thought in his eyes and manner, the miller showed no symptoms to cause Michael extra uneasiness.

At ten o'clock at night he appeared to be so quietly asleep that they ventured to go to bed; Michael, as usual, sleeping in his clothes.

It seemed to him he had been in a troubled, restless sleep for two or three hours, when he was wakened by the noisy flapping of the sack that hung at the entrance to his room, in place of a door.

He sprang up with a sharp and bitter exclamation, knowing well the meaning of this. The weary keeper below had slept too soundly—her cherished prisoner had escaped, leaving the door wide open.

Michael hastened first in the direction of the mill-field.

As he came towards the turn of the hill, he saw the chalky corner of it glaring in strong light.

He hurried on, and coming in sight of the mill, saw flames pouring from one of the windows of the ground-floor.

The door was shut and fastened. One blow from Michael's shoulder sent it in. Flames rushed at him, but he passed through them, to the tall dark form he saw among them, waving his flaming brand like some terrible sorcerer at his hideous rites.

Michael seized him, and succeeded in dragging him near the door; but the madman's success seemed to have given him new strength, for he struggled desperately.

They fell together at last, and lay in the utter helplessness of suffocation.

The fire ascended floor after floor. The little mill where Michael had toiled and

suffered, seemed determined to proclaim at last, in tongues of fire, the cruel secret under which he was perishing.

All Lamberhurst awoke. Esther Ambray was roused by the cry—

“The mill’s on fire !”

She rushed through the crowding figures, crying out to them to save her husband and Michael, and uttering in her piercing cries the secret so long and so jealously guarded.

It was poor Ma’r S’one himself who, made courageous by his love for the old family in which he had served so long, dragged the miller within reach of the ready hands at the door.

When Mrs. Ambray saw that he lived and showed signs of reviving, and that Michael was left within the blazing mill, she cried out to them to save him ; and all the truth as to what he had done for her burst from her trembling heart.

They took his prostrate form from its

painful and perilous couch, with cheers and cries he had no power to hear.

He was not fully conscious of anything from the first moment he had fallen, to the time when he came to his senses in a large dark room he had never seen before.

Then he slept before he had time to wonder.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PEACE.

“ So day by day she past
In either twilight, ghost-like to and fro
Gliding, and every day she tended him,
And likewise every night.”

TENNYSON.

WAKING at noon on the day after the fire, it seemed to Michael that all nature had undergone some great convulsion.

He knew not how to measure the time that had passed from when he had felt his life likely to go on in the same fearful manner for years till now, when he seemed to have been laid aside, away from all former associations.

He was not at all assured that the former

hard life was done with. He felt that his misery had somehow reached a point which nature could not pass, and at which some great shock had come to end the awful life for a time.

He felt passively grateful for the pause, without trying to discern what would come after it.

He suffered much pain, for his right shoulder was seriously injured ; but he scarcely cared about it. It seemed like some safeguard on his thoughts, to keep them from seeing too clearly either backward or forward. It occupied him like a troublesome child.

He knew, at the end of the fifth day, that he was at Buckholt—that Nora had often been in to see him, though he had not seen her, or been aware of her visits.

This knowledge had not moved him very much, for he knew, from the old woman who sat in his room, that his life had for some hours been despaired of, and that all was

now known to the world about the miller's madness. He felt it quite natural she should come, but he was powerless to guess as to what she would think of it all. She might take what he had done as a sign of his own madness ; and there were times when Michael was not sure the world would not prove to him, on his recovery, that all his toil and torment had been a mistake from beginning to end.

The miller, he heard, was not as much hurt by the fire as himself, but it had wrought a blessed change in him. The malady, which had been hitherto as a demon, was now harmless as a lamb—all weakness, and touching helplessness, and dependency ; and so, the doctors said, it would probably remain while life remained.

By-and-by he began to have a yearning to see these second parents of his, and at his message Mrs. Ambray came.

She had been instructed as to the manner in which she was to meet Michael after all

that had happened, and bore herself very well, appearing as if the fire and all about it was a matter to show no great concern over, but to mention as she mentioned the cup of tea they drank together.

The first pleasure Michael knew was hearing of how gentle and harmless that terrible guest of the miller's little household had become. Drops of delicious gratitude filled his eyes, as the faithful wife showed that she and the at-first-hated awful result of the miller's troubles were now on terms sufficiently intimate and amicable for her even to smile at some of his freaks.

Michael was pleased to hear that Nora had at last received a letter from Bardsley, written by his friend Traps. It was in answer to her advertisements for him and Polly, and requesting her to send money, that he might come down to see her about the assistance she purposed giving them.

"Nora does not come near *me*, now that I should know her," Michael said, in an apparently unconcerned voice.

Mrs. Ambray thought it sufficient for that day to tell him that Nora cooked everything he ate and drank with her own hands, and had the entire management of him, though old Miss Milwood was staying in the house, having come there as a Sister of Mercy to Michael, whose story was in everybody's mouth.

Nora was having the mill restored, so that, when those who had suffered in it should become well enough to see it again, all that happened to it should appear as a dream ; so prosperous and bright she meant to make it.

Every day now Michael's desire to move about outran his strength, though that increased surprisingly for a time.

But soon there came a change in this.

He began to weary of the kind of soft mysterious undertone into which all life seemed to have sunk, and to wonder whether it would never rise to something larger and richer.

A strange proud doubt as to what Nora might be thinking and feeling about all that had been discovered, kept his tongue from giving way to the aching desire of his heart to ask to see her.

He felt he could not endure for her to look upon his struggles and sufferings as a kind of well-meant folly. His soul cried to him to let it remain for ever lonely and sad, rather than give it the miserable comfort of pity, or even love, without that perfect and unquestioning sympathy in its past aims, anguish, and triumphs, for which now it sickened and yearned.

At last Mrs. Ambray gave way to his entreaties that he might see the miller, and on that same day he saw Nora also.

Ambray had now two prevailing moods. At times the old state of expectancy about George came back to him so strongly, nothing could keep him from wearying himself with preparations, night watching, and waiting at the post-office for letters. These

times were trying to all about him, for his anxiety and restlessness, though gentle, were as evidently as real as could trouble a sane person.

But at other times he was quite quiet and happy, spending many hours gazing with a smile on the pages of his *Paradise Lost*, and in reasoning on the price of wheat with an old tree stump, which he took for a corndealer at Tidhurst.

Mrs. Ambray arranged that Michael was to come on one of these quiet days.

The miller was to be seated at the door so that he could see him coming, and then, if he showed any signs of emotion at the sight of him, the meeting was to be prevented.

When Michael set out from Buckholt, the March air was soft, and full of the same odours it breathed when first he entered Lamberhurst.

He had then come to claim as parents these people he had never seen. Now his

work for them was finished, and he went from no duty, but simple craving to see them, and take what small reward might come to him from their welcome.

When he saw the miller at the door, he knew the old man had perceived him first, and was watching him steadily.

Suddenly Michael saw him rise and go into the cottage.

Michael would have turned back, but Mrs. Ambray came out, and beckoned to him ; so he went on.

Presently the miller came out again.

He looked so gentle and pleased at the sight of his approaching visitor, that Michael felt in a sort of dream.

He was much changed. His face was more delicate and sensitive. There was a refined and sweet tranquillity about it, it had never worn before. He reminded the visitor both of George and Nora.

When Michael came into the garden, Ambray met him, and, laying his hands on

his shoulders, looked into his face with eyes full of tenderness and pleasure.

"Not a word, my boy," he said. "Not a word about it all, if you'd have *me* be silent."

Apparently scarcely able to restrain his joy, the miller drew Michael into the cottage.

Nora was sitting near the window.

She looked up, pale and agitated, as Ambray led Michael impatiently, and with a trembling eagerness, to her. Could she help the remembrance of that previous day of terror, when the miller had dragged him before her, to hear of George's death?

His manner now filled them both with wonder and embarrassment.

"Nora," said the miller, "will you not let bygones be bygones?"

Nora laid her work down on her trembling knees, and looked at it bewildered and distressed.

"Nora," he said again, "won't you look

up and see who is here? Haven't you one word for my son? Nora, this is George! Come, down on your knees, bad boy, and beg her pardon."

Michael fell upon his knees, and kissed the hands of his unseen nurse, to hide the strange joy and anguish that seemed like to burst his heart.

His dream was realized. The miller had called him his son. The precious goal was reached at last—but how? Would it last?

Ambray would not hear of him leaving the house. So Michael returned to his old quarters, and, when he got stronger, superintended the restoration of the mill.

Nora's heart was still a mystery to him. They had met constantly, daily, but the miller's allusions to them as betrothed lovers made them feel an unnatural constraint they could scarcely hide from him.

CHAPTER XXX.

FOUND AND LOST.

“ But one, poor one, one poor and loving child,
But one thing to rejoice and solace in,
And cruel death has catch'd it from my sight.”

SHAKSPEARE.

It was on one of the old miller's “ quiet days ” that Bardsley arrived.

Michael had come from the mill to his early tea, and was standing at the porch, reading the newspaper to Ambray, who sat just within the door.

Nora was leaving them, and saying “ good-bye ” to her aunt at the gate, when Bardsley pushed it against her.

It was the blind man's elaborate apology for this that made Michael aware of his approach. He knew the voice instantly,

and looked up, a crowd of stormy recollections coming over him.

The moment he could think, he saw the great necessity for keeping the miller ignorant of Bardsley's visit.

But Bardsley made this impossible by coming straight up to the porch.

A look of remembrance came at Ambray's first glance at him.

It was a troubled, indistinct sort of recognition that Michael watched dawning in his face.

"Who is he, George?" he said. "Isn't it that old impostor we saw at the Bay with the girl? What does he want?"

Bardsley stood with his stick feeling gently for the edge of the porch step.

Michael was unable to think of any means of preventing him saying anything he wished to do; he was so struck by the peculiar smile that came on the blind man's face at Ambray's words, he could do nothing else but look at it.

"Don't throw any 'ard words at me, gov'ner," said he, with much gentleness. "You and me, gov'ner, is too old, and is had too much from one to t'other o' both sides, to bear 'ard words o' aether side. The best man I ever knowed—his parfesnal name were 'Traps'—had a matter which were the comfort of his own life, sir, and of a good many more lives besides his own, which matter was, 'Let it drop'; and whether it comes from the Bible or Shakespeare, or Traps hisself, I can only say as it's worthy of aether one of 'em, and might do a mint o' good wrote big up in the House o' Lords, or Commons, or wherever them wars is hatched. In the Law Courts, too, it might be with advantage, and on all family coats o' arms likewise, if *my* advice was taken. Do I take the liberty to smell—tea?"

"Tea—let's have tea, mother. George wants his tea—eh, boy?" said the miller, drawing up his tall form by the help of Michael's arm.

After leading him in to his great Windsor chair, which had been his father's, and which Nora had sent up from Buckholt, Michael came out again to speak to Bardsley.

Nora was waiting to hear whether this was indeed the grandfather of George's wife, whom she had been so anxious to find.

Michael nodded in reply to her inquiring glance, and said to the old man—

"Here is the lady who has been advertising for you, Bardsley, and who's going to provide for you and Polly."

Bardsley immediately turned and faced Nora, as readily as any one with sight could have done.

He took his hat off, and she was struck with the venerable and sorrowful appearance of the head, as most persons were, on first seeing it uncovered.

Michael noticed a great change in its whole expression. The sorrow had more of sad, sharp truth in it. The cunning was

still there in every line of the face, but it was like a power that had grown weary of itself. The lips still had the same habit of twitching and half smiling, with the sense of the inexhaustible flow of what they felt to be clever, philosophical, or witty sayings, rising to them with every breath. But even the mouth had undergone a change, weariness being more strongly apparent there than vanity in its own wisdom, or contempt for the dulness of mankind in general, which it expressed so plainly in past days.

It is a strange sensation to come suddenly upon the person or thing that has changed one's whole life, and the lives of those nearest.

Nora, as she looked on Bardsley, felt in her very soul that faint dizzy chill which one might feel, looking for the first time on the spot where some beloved Alpine climber has fallen and been dashed to death.

Michael, seeing that she suffered, and that her lips were very white, spoke him-

self to Bardsley, that she might have time to recover.

“Why, what in the world have you done with yourself all this time? You must have lived underground, or over the clouds in a balloon, to have been out of the way of all these sharp fellows that were set to look you up.”

“As to that, sir,” answered Bardsley, “if I may speak accord’n to my own obser-wation o’ things in gineral, I shud say as there’s no greater difficulty can be put in the way of findin’ a person, as the simple fac’ that that person is hisself ingaged in the seekin’ of some one else, and that some one else happens to be the only think as makes him care for to be found hisself anywhere but in his grave.”

“You surely do not mean that your granddaughter has never been found since the trial?” Nora asked quickly, and with a womanly tenderness of tone that made Bardsley’s patched coat heave gratefully towards her.

He felt in his hat and found his handkerchief among other stores—for its recesses formed his wardrobe and library. He kept there his petition for the blind, some soup tickets, an old comb, a scarf for cold weather, a few other little comforts and necessaries, and also a few relics that had their own romance, not in his eyes, but in his tough old fingers.

He took his handkerchief from this general receptacle, and stood a moment holding it in one hand, and his hat in the other, while a bright drop rolled down, and settled on his beard, looking like fresh rain on frosted grass.

“Surely,” repeated Nora, “the child was found?”

“Madam, she was,” answered Bardsley. “She was found, and yet—I must likewise say she is lost; and yet again, there’s them, I believe, in those worlds which the blind can see as much of as the sighted—there’s them, I believe, as rejoices over her, and says she is found.”

Nora looked in tearful and deep disappointment at Michael, whose grave eyes and nod told her he too understood from Bardsley's words and manner that Polly was beyond all earthly comfort and succour.

The old man's dignity broke down under the sense of their silent sympathy. His stick trembled as he leant forward on it, and he let the general receptacle fall, and its treasures strewed the garden path.

While Michael led him to the porch seat, Nora gathered up the contents of the hat.

Among these was a tress of Polly's exquisite hair. It burst through a piece of greasy newspaper as Nora took it up, and gushed over her hand, and down her loose sleeve, and lay upon her uplifted arm, like a sunbeam on a lovely marble pillar.

Nora looked at it with misty eyes, and a swelling throat.

Michael went in to see whether Mrs. Ambray thought it would be likely to have

any injurious effect on the miller, if Bardsley came into the cottage to have his tea, and to give his account of his own and poor Polly's wanderings.

"Bless him! No—look at him," answered old Esther, half smiling, and quite sighing.

Then Michael looking, saw that Ambray was absorbed by one of his favourite problems, a new regulator for the mill, his only materials and tools being the toast-rack and two teaspoons.

He gave Bardsley a condescending nod of welcome when they brought him in. He evidently did not now remember even having seen him before.

Mrs. Ambray explained that he was a poor blind man, much in need of a cup of tea, and the miller waved his hand, and told him he was welcome.

Bardsley's quick ear detected the truth as to the miller's condition immediately, and he understood Michael at once when he

warned him not to mention any familiar names before him.

Bardsley sat where they placed him, in unusual silence, for several minutes.

Michael saw that the state of poor George's father touched him, as he had never believed him capable of being touched.

At the miller's slightest movement, or word, the blind old face grew full of reverential sorrow, and almost awestricken attention.

It was evident his own great bereavement had at last cured his blindness of heart as to Ambray's loss. His sympathy was real and profound.

The genial influence of kind listeners, fragrant tea, and hot cakes, soon began to loosen Bardsley's tongue.

In telling this last sad portion of Polly's history, there was some of his old cunning and departure from the exact line of truth, for the sake of effect, but there was less of it than might have been expected. At

certain parts it disappeared entirely, as might be told by the way in which he allowed his own conduct to stand in an unfavourable light before his listeners.

Michael had his own doubts as to the truth of his first statement. This statement was that Polly ran away at the time of his (Michael's) trial, because she feared being compelled to give evidence unfavourable to George's memory.

It seemed far more likely that Bardsley had wished to please the miller by damaging Michael's character, and had tried to force Polly to promise to swear falsely concerning him. Or it might have been that the poor child was influenced by both these things.

However this was, she had clearly been seized by a panic of fear about the trial, and had left her little room in the old court at night, and concealed herself so as to baffle all the efforts of Bardsley and Traps at discovering her.

For the first three weeks Polly had not left the court at all, but had taken refuge with a young lacemaker, who was bedridden in the garret of the last house. The two girls had known each other from babyhood, and the lacemaker had taught Polly her trade long before she learnt the basket-making. They had frequently assisted each other in times of extreme poverty.

At the time the Bardsleys became first acquainted with George Ambray, old Bardsley and the lacemaker's half silly father had a furious quarrel, in which the blind man received some injury.

Polly could not forgive this. She had gone up at once to her old acquaintance, denounced her as the daughter of an old tiger, and withdrew at once, and, as she declared, for ever, her friendship, lace-cushion, and pins.

Ever since then, and till the time of Michael's trial, the girls had never met, and Polly had kept her word so well, that this

house was the very last one in the world in which Bardsley would have thought of seeking Polly, when he discovered her flight from home.

It must have been a gleam of his own cunning that led the poor child there.

She found the young lacemaker in little less trouble than herself.

Her father had been behaving so badly to the lodgers as to drive them all away, one after another, till the house was empty ; and now his mind was so confused by its natural infirmity, and drink, and grief, she could scarcely make him understand her when she sent him on errands for food, or to dispose of her work. What was worse than all, the poor girl began to have a numbness in her fingers, which made work tedious and painful.

Poor Polly came to her as an angel of mercy and comfort, and was welcome indeed to the shelter and concealment she begged for on her knees at Sally's bed, in return for any services she could give.

A spell of sulky silence had fallen on the lacemaker's father, so the girl's fear, that he would betray Polly when out on his little errands, came to nothing.

At the end of three weeks, however, the lacemaker saw the old men talking together, and Polly took fright and hid herself, and after a day's pain and suspense went right away.

"She was destinated," said Bardsley, "to fall into rougher hands next time. As soon as I was at liberty, after that business which I will not name"—he looked at the miller with respectful caution—"I set off north'ards to a village where I knowed she had made another friend; but here I heered nothink of her. I was in the wrong part o' the world altogether regardin' Polly. On my way back in the d'rection of London, I fell ill myself, and was laid up 'bove a fortnight at Halham workus. Up again, and on the tramp, I decided next on the Surrey towns and villages, she being familiar with

'em, through spendin' her Sunday, when a little girl, along o' Traps, in his business scurscions.

"It was at Kingston I heered that one o' Polly's discription had been noticed in the town about a week before I come there. I spent the next—let's see—Friday, Toosday—the next eight days, followin' up as best I could the ways she seemed to have took, and the woman as was with her. Wen I came near to the place where they was stoppin', I hears as the woman with the blind girl was her own mother, so that set me all wrong again, and what way to turn I knew no more'n a man in the sea, without stick or straw. The next day I heered some chaps in a beershop talkin' about this woman with the blind darter, sayin' how ill she used her, and one of 'em says—says he—‘Don't believe the gal's her darter at all.’ This set me all of a turn. It was nine 'clock at night, but I couldn't rest. ‘It's my Polly in this Jezabel's clutches,’ thinks

I. Off I set to where I'd heard they was. It was a market town, and a market night. The High-street was stuffed with cabbage trucks, and butchers' shops, and all sort o' shops turnin' theirselves inside out to the street, everybody hollerin' above everybody else. My stiffifit saved me a little, but folks shut me up when I tried to beg for help to get to the p'lice, which, I'd heered, were on the look out for this wixen with the blind girl. They shut me up with mutterin', ' Wotever's this blind man doin' out in such a jam as this ? ' and shoved by me, stuffin' a copper in my hand or not, accordin' to character and circumstances, but more accordin' to character than circumstances. All of a sudden, in the middle o' the din, and in the thickest o' the jam, I heered my Polly's little woice, singing, I could swear, out of a aching heart, and a empty stomach. I went like one demented, strikin' out right and left to get at her. It only made the crowd get thicker round

me, and dewide us more an' more. I couldn't bear that. I went on like a mad man, and the idjuts collared me, and had me locked up for a hincapable. Hincapable, indeed! What did they call theirselves? Hincapable as a stone wall o' partin', to let two meet as called to each other as *we* called. I *did* hear her answer to me. I knowed all night I'd heered her, and what I suffered was punishment enough without *my* ever being necessitated to intrude on any worser sort o' world on account o' my sins. The next day I was kep' all day, because they said the 'thorities had to consider what was to be done before I was set free. How I have hated 'thorities ever since! I got out at evenin', lost her again. Heered nothing but the woman's bad treatment of her. Tracked 'em round Hanway. At evenin' I heerd her little woice agin, moanin' and complainin' on before me as I come along the common. I called to her, 'Polly, Polly!' and then I heered her

scream and laugh out like a woman in 'sterics, and after that there was no sound to guide me to her. As I heered no answer when I kep' callin' and callin' to her, I made sure she had fell in a faint, or that the Jezabel was with her, and was stoppin' her mouth, the Lord knowed how. I called and felt about with my stick half the night, and lost my way off the road, lost all count of it, and fell upon the scratchin' gorse at nigh every step. At last, mercy o' mercies ! I hear one little cry from far enough, and I make in the d'rection of it, callin' to her to cry out again, and so help me to her. Then comes all right her blessed little song o' 'Daddy, Daddy,' and led me to her where she lay.

" She was so thin, I was well able to hold her huddled up warm in my coat. All she said to me then was, ' Daddy, may I come home, and never have to swear nothink never no more ? ' I promised her, and she remarked as she was very 'appy, and cared for nothink else.

"I got 'elp for her next day, and money enough to take her home. I thought—all the way—I thought as she'd scarcely last out till we got back to the old place. I could have had her cared for and doctored where we was, but I was told as doctorin' could only be done then as a matter o' form, and that, as she wanted so much to go home, it was better for to take her.

"So I took her home, and laid her on her little bed, and such pleasure as her little 'art was full of I never knowed afore.

"She lingered out one day and one night. The lacemaker was beside her. She *would* be carried out to our place to see her, and in the mornin', before it was light, she gave a scream. I was settin' with Traps, and I went up. I thought at first it was all over, but we got her to herself once more—but not for long.

"She was able in a little while to turn about, and give thanks and good-byes to her friends, which at this hour was many.

"It's wonderful how cheap friendship is when death is nigh. I s'pose it's because so little is like to be wanted of it, and that for such a short time. Every one in the house began to find out how much they had loved poor Polly, and Polly was very grateful for all such discoveries.

"By-and-by, as she got weaker, she seemed to forget that any one besides me was in the room, and begun to talk to me in a way as set all a-cryin', and there was some toughish ones among 'em too.

"'Daddy,' she says, and the tears came creepin' down her meek bit of a face. 'Daddy, I've bin a-thinkin' about my gents —my reg'ler customers, I mean, as goes by the Dook's Column. I didn't think never to set there no more. They's been very kind to me. I wish they knowed, daddy, as I'm a goin' off along o' them flowers I sold 'em this morning. I wonder if they'd be sorry, daddy, and not chuck 'em away quite so soon?'

" Then she fell a-wonderin' if she would be likely to have her sight up in 'eaven. My own prayer was that, if she could be as happy without, she might *not* have sight, for I knowed as sure as ever it might so be as she shud see her wicked old grandfather down in t'other place, it would be the blind school business over again, and down she'd come—if come she could—to me and ruin like a shot !

" 'Yes,' she says, 'I shud like to see if my gents looks for me, where I used to be. There's one, dad—ah! one *we* knows—as I've often wished to be a lady for the sake on. Can you get to be a lady up in 'eaven, I wonder ? '

" She said her gents had tried her sometimes, takin' advantage of her being a poor blind girl to tease her as they didn't ought.

" 'But,' she says, 'we must forgive trespasses, and I know I've been much wickeder to them a-callin' out "sweet wilets" when I knowed they had no smell,

and wirin' up rotten camillies and roses as wouldn't last an hour, and sellin' 'em for fresh gathered. Ah! ' she say, ' I've bin a wicked gal ! '

" She was quiet after that ; we thought she'd fell into a sort o' doze. Then she give my arm a pull, and says—

" ' Shall ha' the three for tuppence, sir—last in the basket—an' I wants to git home.'

" She never said no more. She lay some time awares of nothink. Traps came up to see her then. Some thought him a brute for not comin' before, but I had my own thoughts upon his keepin' away, when I heerd his woice. Some one told him he'd left his door open, and the birds were all flyin' away. And Traps says, says he, ' Let 'em fly, and all the world behind 'em, for what I care, if *she's* to fly ! ' "

It was evident that the remembrance of his old friend's sorrow and sympathy softened for Bardsley the bitterness of that hour.

"I never knowed she was gone," he said, "till Traps laid hold of me to lug me away, and then I knowed at once.

"It's wonderful what a hurry people is in always to tear you away from one you care for, the instant the breath's out o' the body, as if it wasn't still more to you than all the breath o' earth or 'eaven.

"When I felt that she was really took from me, really gone, I saw it was no use to argufy with the A'mighty about it—I only felt as I feel now. He is responsible for me as well as Polly, and I shud like to know what He means to do with me, that's all. If He thinks as I'm goin' to be better without her than I was with her, it's a mistake—that's all I know."

To turn his thoughts from this dangerous direction, they asked him about Polly's burial.

He told them how Traps followed her with him to Thames Dutton churchyard, where she begged to be laid, and how his one wish

now was to have a stone over her grave
with nothing on it but

POLLY,

BORN TO TROUBLE.

Traps had killed and stuffed her favourite linnet, and had got permission to lay it, as his last token of regard, on Polly's unconscious breast.

The miller had, at an early stage of Bardsley's story, drawn up his long limbs and gone quietly to rest.

Nora, therefore, had nothing to prevent her from giving Polly's grandfather the comfort of knowing how she had arranged to provide for him for the rest of his life.

He *was* comforted to a certain extent; but still, great philosopher as he thought himself, poor Bardsley was not above that weakness to which all who receive a great and unexpected benefit late in life are subject. Regret that it did not come sooner

overpowers the pleasure of having it in the present.

When the poor yellow autumn leaves of life are touched with a little sunshine, what sighs of regret and envy rise from past events—those flowers of spring and summer that have had their day and died.

Bardsley had come to Lamberhurst fully expecting generosity on the part of Polly's relations. Nora had exceeded his own ideas of what she would do for him, and yet he had never in his life felt more utterly wretched than when he laid down to rest that night.

He slept at Buckholt farm, to which Ma'r S'one conducted him with a carefulness that brought upon his meek head Bardsley's keenest satire.

He was to stay a week at Lamberhurst, but after two days he became so weary of the place, which he called "Stagnation-hurst," and so restless, that he suddenly discovered that business of his friend Traps

required his presence in London immediately.

In those two days Nora and Michael had provided him with a new outfit, but he had declined to exchange his overcoat and hat for any other.

The old miller had spent some time with him, taking him about the farm and hop-gardens, and explaining the different qualities of the fields.

All the village turned pitying eyes on the two bereaved old men—the one with sight blind to his loss, and the blind one seeing his at every step. Both were very feeble, though Bardsley's infirmity made the miller feel himself a strong man beside him, and the miller's state of mental weakness caused Bardsley to consider himself blessed with all the advantage of youth, as compared with poor Ambray. So they went tottering about, each submitting to the other's ostentatious patronage and guidance, with pitying condescension.

When Bardsley set off to walk to the Bay, from whence he was to take the train to London, he declined Michael's company so decidedly, that it was plainly seen he wished to begin alone his new entrance into the world.

The trembling old form looked very desolate as they watched it passing on through the light faint April foliage. The air was soft and fresh, and full of joyous tones. It was just such a morning, he felt, as would have set Polly chattering merrily and sweetly as the birds, and given springs to her little bare feet trudging at his side.

Bardsley shut his hard square mouth against the sweet air, which even his nostrils sniffed with an expression of rebellious protest against the lonely life it fed. It brought him breaths from the little wild flowers she used to sell. These breaths—long, faint, and searching—seemed to creep into his soul for tidings of her, their little mistress, their lost queen, who used to

place them in such rank as it pleased her, humbling or exalting them, in her little bouquets, according to her blind, sweet fancy.

As those watching him saw him again just where the road rises, he was met by a farmer, to whom he immediately presented his hat in the old begging manner.

Before, however, the farmer had time to give or refuse what he asked, Bardsley, evidently recollecting himself, thrust on his hat, and waved his arm impatiently to the astonished farmer, who stared after him.

In this movement there was a pathetic meaning his benefactors could not possibly mistake. It said as plainly as words could say—

“The clumsy mortals ! They have even robbed me of my only object in life, the necessity to beg for my bread ! ”

CHAPTER XXXI.

CONCLUSION.

"Then came there unto him all his brethren, and all his sisters, and comforted him."

JOB.

THE little mill is finished, and at work once more.

The newness, which might be an eyesore in other buildings, is a great charm here. The deal window frames and doors are almost dazzling in their fresh, native whiteness; and all the outside, painted white, with ebony black finishings, is a magnet for every gleam of sunshine in the joyous spring.

The April sun shines on it now, and the

breeze bears round its heavy sails with steady speed.

The tramp of Michael's feet is on the little ladders, and his head frames itself in one after another of the tiny windows.

He has not heard Nora, who has come to call him to breakfast, and who stands where, all white, silent, and soft—warm with friction, and sweet of smell—the soul for which this wooden body toils and frets rains down in snowy plenty.

It was only yesterday that the two brave hearts had understood each other. Until then Michael had never known in what light Nora regarded those things in which his soul refused passionately all sympathy from her but that full and perfect sympathy for which it longed, half hoped for, but sometimes despaired of.

But yesterday evening, as Mrs. Ambray was speaking of late events, Michael had suddenly met Nora's eyes fixed on him with a look so full of lowly, childlike reverence,

and tearful wonder, he felt for the first time the victor's ecstasy and triumph.

He had said nothing to her then; but this morning, as he sees her standing there, half sadly gazing at the raining meal, and feeling its warmth in her little hand, he knows his lips can no longer be silent.

"What a time George and Nora are!" said the miller, waiting for his breakfast. "They *must* be settling it all this morning, surely."

He was right: for on their return they no longer offered objections to the day he appointed for their marriage.

In the afternoon, when Michael returned from the mill, in that joy which is so strong from the sense that it is yet only in its spring promise, and has its summer—full and rich—before it, a great surprise awaited him.

The miller was out, and the little room

was thronged with tall forms, and bearded faces.

A pair of girlish arms—not Nora's—were thrown round his neck; and he recognized his sister, his father, and brothers.

As he did so, and as Nora's eyes met his and shared their joy, Michael felt his *two* lives of loving labour meet and melt into each other, in such blissful and perfect harmony that his cup ran over, and he showed more weakness than he had shown in all his trials.

Ma'r S'one lived to an age that made him mentioned in the local papers as one of the antiquities which visitors to Bulver's Bay ought to see. Ma'r S'one himself became a little over excited on the subject, and began to confuse people by finding it was his birthday every six months.

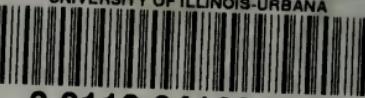
When he died, it seemed like his natural humility not to trouble death to make a special call on his account, but to pass away quietly amongst others in a village fever.

At his young mistress's wedding he had caused some embarrassment by crying out with much earnestness, after the bride-groom's promises—

“ ’Cline our ’erts to keep this la’ !”

THE END.

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